

SPECIAL FEATURE on ERLING BLÖNDAL BENGTTSSON

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Birth: 8th March, 1932

Death: 6th June, 2013

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Born in Copenhagen, Bengtsson gave his first public performance there in 1936, when he was four years old. He was born to a musical family. His father was a Danish violinist and his mother was an Icelandic pianist. His father, in fact, started him on violin lessons when the boy was three, but even at that age he only attempted to play it in an upright position, like a cello! That public debut at the age of four featured him playing *The Swan* by Saint-Saëns. Within a year he had added some pieces by Popper, Nolck, and Beethoven to his repertoire.

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He was sent to Fritz Dietzmann for lessons, who was principal cellist in the Royal Danish Opera Orchestra. At the age of only ten Bengtsson appeared as soloist with the Tivoli Symphony Orchestra. However, most of his musical opportunities, including the possibility of high level studies, were rather limited by the German occupation of the country in 1940-1945 - and only through LP records could he take note of important music.

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Soon after the war he was admitted (at the age of sixteen) to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia where he studied two intense years with Gregor Piatigorsky, who then engaged him as his teaching assistant in 1949. That opportunity in the US came about because Iceland was his mother's native land (which he fondly called his "motherland"), and he began giving concerts in the country. With the result that Iceland gave him financial support to go to the United States for study.

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From 1950 to 1953, Bengtsson taught his own cello class at the Curtis Institute, before being appointed to the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen in '53. He also spent twenty years as a teacher at the Music School of the Swedish Radio in Edburg Castle in Stockholm. In 1980, he became a professor at the Hochschule für Musik Köln. He returned to America in about 1989, teaching at the University of Michigan School of Music until his retirement (in about 2006 I believe).

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He died in Ann Arbor, Michigan, aged 81 (the year 2013), and was survived by his wife Merete of 55 years and two sons, Henrik, Stefan; and grandson Christoffer.

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What did he play? Firstly to say his assimilation of the 'Piatigorsky' style is apparent in his playing and teaching. He played a French cello made by Nicholas Lupot in Paris in 1823, which was kept in top condition throughout its existence. He recorded the Bach Suites (1985) and all of Beethoven's cello works, and was regarded as the greatest Danish cellist. A consistent recording artist, in all he made over 50 albums! In 1998, his recording of the Zoltan Kodaly Solo Sonata, was chosen by the "GUINNESS CLASSICAL 1000" as being one of the top 1000 recordings of all time.

In concert it was not unusual for Bengtsson to perform all the six Bach Suites, by memory, in a single evening. He was especially noted for his performances of William Walton's Cello Concerto, a work written for Piatigorsky. He championed the works of leading Scandinavian composers; as well as performing the Scandinavian premieres of cello concertos by Britten, Barber, Khatchaturian, Delius, Lutoslawsky and Walton

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In teaching, he strived to give his gifted students the type of individual attention he received from Piatigorsky. He cautioned all music students not to rely on recordings of their own playing too much, saying: *"It is not enough afterwards to listen to what you have been doing. You must know it while you are actually playing."*

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Mr. Bengtsson became a role model for a whole family of young cellists in Europe and abroad. He attracted comments like:

"His shining personality, sublime musicianship, and kindness were qualities much treasured by all who knew him." (Dean Paul Boylan)

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I would like to suggest this Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson:

Erling Blöndal Bengtsson plays "Ave Maria." Celebrating a wonderful, long life and career. It is an audio (beautifully played) with many photos attached of his life:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4rVYwXCqQ4>



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