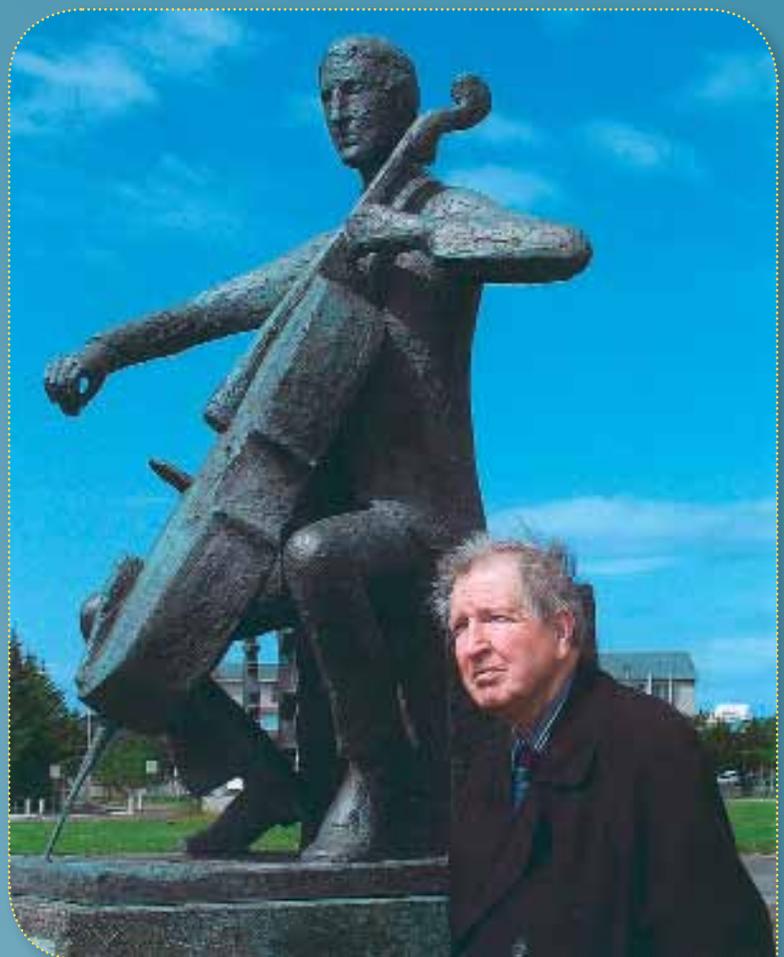


‘There have **never** been as many good cellists as there are today – because there are **so many more good teachers**’

Without seeking the spotlight, Erling Blöndal Bengtsson has spent a career in pursuit of excellence – from his recital debut in 1936 to 60 years of teaching. As he turns 80, the Danish cellist talks to JEFFREY SOLOW about instruments, conductors and studying under Piatigorsky

— Erling Blöndal Bengtsson poses next to a 1970 statue of himself in front of the University Concert Hall in Reykjavik, Iceland



**I**N 1948, THE YEAR BEFORE I WAS BORN, ERLING Blöndal Bengtsson began his studies with Gregor Piatigorsky. He made such an impression that around 20 years later, Piatigorsky would often speak of his former pupil, holding him up to all his students (including me) as a role model for us all. The great Danish cellist celebrates his 80th birthday on 8 March.

In a career that spanned the globe, Bengtsson performed from memory a concert repertoire that encompassed the entire cello literature. He also commissioned and introduced numerous new works. As a teacher he has worked in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Cologne, and was on the faculty of the University of Michigan from 1990 to 2006. He suffered a stroke in 2007 that paralysed the right side of his body, so he no longer plays, but he remains active and has given masterclasses in Iceland and Norway.

Among his recordings are the Bach Suites (which he frequently performed in a single evening) and many other unaccompanied works; sonatas by Beethoven, Brahms, Prokofiev, Barber, Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich; the standard concertos including those by Dvořák, Schumann, Haydn, Lalo and Saint-Saëns; and concertos written specially for him. I spoke with him by telephone on 3 December 2011.

**When you were growing up in Denmark, how much did hearing your father's violin playing influence how you wanted to sound on the cello?**

There was music in the home but I don't think he influenced my playing. When I was about three years old, my father brought me a violin and showed me how to put it under my chin. Even though I never had seen a cellist, I immediately wanted to put the violin between my legs. I don't know why. My mother was on my side, so my father arranged to have an endpin put in a viola. A few months later, when he saw that I was serious, he had a little cello made for me. Somehow I just took very naturally to the cello.

**That's a good argument for cellistic reincarnation. What were your early studies like? Did you study the piano at all?**

When I was six, my father arranged lessons with the principal cellist of the Royal Danish Opera Orchestra, Fritz Dietzmann. He was a good teacher for me at that time and I studied with him for about seven years. He was very exacting in things like intonation, but didn't work too much on interpretation. I think that was good for a little boy. From the beginning I got a sense of how important intonation was and I'm grateful for that. Later I did play the piano, but not very much.

**You started studying with Piatigorsky at the Curtis Institute of Music when you were 16. How did you decide you wanted to study with him? Had you heard him play?**

In 1946, when I was 14, I played a recital in Iceland for the Music Society there. Afterwards, during dinner, three of the directors left the room to confer. When the dessert came round, one of the directors rose and said, 'We will give Erling two years in America to study.' That was right after the Second World War, so America was the country to go to. At the same time, the violinist Adolf Busch was in Iceland. He heard me and said, 'You must definitely go to Piatigorsky.' Naturally I had heard about Piatigorsky, so I wrote to tell him about myself, and he accepted me. I went in the summer

## TIMELINE

**1932**

Born in Copenhagen to a Danish violinist father and an Icelandic pianist mother

**1936**

Makes recital debut in Copenhagen at the age of four

**1942**

Gives first concerto performance with the Tivoli Symphony Orchestra

**1948–53**

Studies with Piatigorsky at the Curtis Institute of Music, later becoming his assistant

**1953**

Joins the faculty of the Royal Danish Conservatory, Copenhagen

**1958–78**

Teaches at the Swedish Radio Music School in Stockholm, Sweden

**1965**

Appointed a First Knight of the Danish Order of the Dannebrog

**1978–82**

Teaches at the Hochschule für Musik in Cologne, Germany

**1990–2006**

Professor at the University of Michigan School of Music, US

of 1948. He invited me up to his house in Elizabethtown, New York. That was where we had our first meeting. He arranged for me to come to Tanglewood right away, and I played the Haydn D major Concerto with the Tanglewood orchestra.

**When I was studying with Piatigorsky he used to tell us he wanted his students to 'exploit' him for his musical knowledge and experience. If he felt we were not doing so, he would recount how you would bring in a new piece to every lesson. What were your lessons like?**

I played a lot of repertoire. Piatigorsky could say in a few words what other people need the whole lesson to say. And he talked about all kinds of things, but it all ended up with something that you really benefited from. And we became good friends.

**Piatigorsky admired the fact that when you didn't have a lot of time to practise, you would play through all the Piatigorsky caprices.**

I never practised for too many hours but certainly a cellist has to practise to stay in shape. For quite a few years I played a different Bach suite every day, and then Piatigorsky's twelve caprices on the seventh day. That is a very satisfying way to keep in shape. ▶



Bengtsson gave his first public recital in 1936 at the age of four

COURTESY MARGARET CAMPBELL



COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Bengtsson performed with the Detroit-based Scandinavian Symphony Orchestra on 29 January 1949

Playing goes so much easier when you think about the bow's coordination with the left hand

**You had already been playing concerts when you went to Piatigorsky. How did you launch your career?**

My first concert with orchestra was at the Tivoli Concert Hall in Copenhagen, when I was ten. I played a very good concerto by the Czech composer Franz Neruda who spent most of his life in Denmark. The next year I played Saint-Saëns's First Concerto and from then on things just continued.

When Piatigorsky asked me to be his assistant at Curtis I wasn't allowed to play concerts in America because I was on a student visa. However, I did play some concerts in Detroit with the Scandinavian Symphony Orchestra, which was made up of immigrants. I really wasn't allowed to do it but I did. Since 1990, when I returned to the US, I have played in many American cities, including New York, Baltimore and Washington DC.

**Can you tell me about your cello and where you found it?**

It is a Nicolas Lupot cello made in 1823, the year before he died. He made very few cellos and as far as I know, mine was his 13th. I was very lucky to get that cello – I learnt that a cellist in the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra was selling one. I went to Helsinki to try it out and I loved it, but the owner was asking a ridiculous price so I gave up on it. He phoned me a year later to say that if I still wanted to buy the cello, he would sell it for the price I had offered.

**In 1956 you performed on Danish TV with a different cello – what was that one?**

It was an excellent Danish cello made in 1935 by J.N. Frost, which I played on for many years. I tried many other cellos but somehow I always returned to the Frost. >



COURTESY ERLING BLÖNDAL BENGTSOON

A portrait from 1957, when Bengtsson was teaching in Copenhagen



▲ Bengtsson maintained his friendship with Jacqueline and Gregor Piatigorsky, seen here in 1968

**Can you say a little about your experiences performing chamber music, and as an orchestral player?**

I played in a trio that performed pretty regularly and once I played second cello in the Schubert String Quintet with the Amadeus Quartet. In the summer of 1951 I played in the Perpignan Festival Orchestra with Pablo Casals conducting. I think we recorded 20 LPs with the orchestra and they were marvellous. Sasha Schneider was an excellent concertmaster and he helped Casals quite a lot. Paul Tortelier and his wife were both in the orchestra as well. I heard Tortelier many, many times. He wasn't using his bent endpin by that time, but later on he became obsessed with it. He was a personality.

**You must have played for Casals. What was that like?**

I played for Casals at his home, a very modest caretaker's house. His studio was so small that before I could play, Casals and I had to carry out a dining table, Casals holding one end and I the other. After I played for him, he said to me, 'You ought to be here!' meaning that he wanted me to stay on after the festival and study with him.

## Piatigorsky could say in a few words what other people need the whole lesson to say

**What goes through your mind when you perform? Can you comment any further on your interpretive philosophy?**

I wish I knew what went through my mind when performing. I don't have any special philosophy for when I'm playing, although I suppose I could say that I want to play each piece as though it were the first time. Of course, the way you play depends a little bit on whether the hall you are playing in is small or huge.



Bengtsson performs on a Nicolas Lupot cello made in 1823

**You collaborated with many great conductors during your career. Do you have any conductor stories?**

The king of Denmark, Frederick IX, was quite a good conductor. He was also an admirer of Malcolm Sargent, who was a great lover of royalty. Once when I was about to go to London to play in the Royal Albert Hall, the king asked me to give the conductor his regards. I did that – in front of the orchestra, which delighted him.

**You have played a lot of contemporary music, and were the second cellist to play the Walton Concerto. Did you play Piatigorsky's ossias in that work, or just as it was written by Walton?**

It must have been the way Walton wrote it because I learnt it before it was published, from a kind of a manuscript. Piatigorsky played it seven times – twice in Boston, once in London and four times with the New York Philharmonic – and then I got the performance rights to it for a whole year. I played it three times with Walton conducting, twice with the Hallé in Manchester, and once with the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall. I played it many times in countries where they had never heard it.

**Did you work with other composers?**

I played Britten's Suite no.1 when he was in Copenhagen to receive a prize and there was a concert in his honour. He told me that I was the first cellist he had heard play it after Rostropovich. That was very nice. Later I played Britten's other suites. ▶

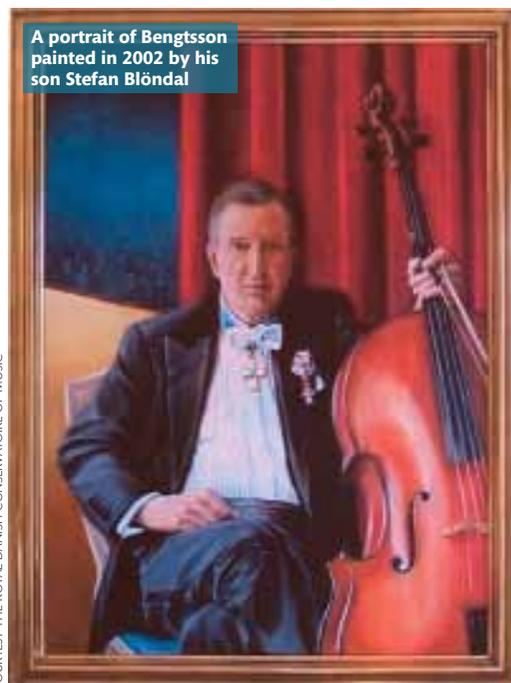
I played the Lutoslawski Concerto four times with the composer conducting, including a live broadcast in Copenhagen. It begins with 22 or 25 Ds, and when I came to the 9th or 10th D, a gentleman from the first row suddenly approached the stage and cried, 'No, that's impossible – that can't be in the music!' Somehow they got him out but I had to continue because it was a live broadcast. It really required concentration.

**What do you think about authentic performance practice, especially with Bach?**

I often wonder how people think they know how music was played in the 18th century. Naturally you don't play Bach like Schumann, but I don't believe in this so-called authentic performance, with a crescendo on each note. I'm sure that Bach would be happy to hear a 'modern' performance of his suites, because in his time they probably they didn't have the technique to do it that way. The main thing in the Bach Suites is the music.

**One of the technical aspects of cello playing that many cellists and most cello students worry about is shifting. How do you think about the process of shifting, and explain it to your students?**

When playing shifts, you must not begin with the left hand but with the bow. Most students have such concern for the left, but really the bow is the foundation of playing. In my experience, when you think about the bow and its coordination with the left hand, playing goes so much easier. I think that is the main point to bear in mind with shifts.



A portrait of Bengtsson painted in 2002 by his son Stefan Blöndal

COURTESY THE ROYAL DANISH CONSERVATOIRE OF MUSIC

**I can recognise Piatigorsky's philosophy there, regarding the importance of the right hand. Is there any other particular piece of advice that you give to students?**

I tell them to ask their favourite composers to write for them. I have requested that my own favourite composers write for the cello, and have had 14 cello concertos written for me by Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Icelandic composers.

**Are there any performances you have heard that particularly stand out in your memory?**

I heard Emanuel Feuermann when I was five or six years old – he played the Haydn Concerto no.1 – and I heard Gaspar Cassadó play the Lalo Concerto so wonderfully that I still remember it. I will never forget the first time I heard Piatigorsky in person. He was playing *Don Quixote* with Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, displaying his commanding personality on the stage. The only time I heard Jascha Heifetz was a recital in the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. That was around 1950 and it was a memorable performance.

**How do you think playing has changed during your lifetime? Do you find any notable differences between teaching in Europe and America?**

I don't think I have seen cello playing change much – you have always had to play in tune. There have never been as many good cellists as there are today, because there are so many more good teachers, but I don't think that one can say that the performance style has changed. I don't find any particular difference between students in Europe and in the US. Maybe there was a difference once, but now it doesn't matter whether a student is educated in London or New York. ■

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Bengtsson has premiered 14 cello concertos written at his own request

SØREN BIERREGAARD