

A Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson



Bent Lorentzen
Cello Concerto (1984)

Leif Thybo
Cello Concerto (1959)

Svend Westergaard
Cello Concerto Op. 26

Peter Heise
2 Fantasy Pieces (1860)

Franz Neruda
Cello Concerto No. 2

Emil Hartmann
Cello Concerto Op. 26

Johan Svendsen
Cello Concerto Op. 7

Pyotr Tchaikovsky
Variations on a Rococo Theme

The Danish Radio Recordings 1962-1987

The Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra

The Symphony Orchestras of Aalborg & Aarhus & Odense

Conductors: Oliver Knussen · Thomas Jensen · Ole Schmidt

Alf Sjøen · Børge Wagner · Pierre Monteux

Nina Kavtaradze, piano

Danacord has issued many recordings by **Erling Blöndal Bengtsson**, the eminent cellist born in Copenhagen on 8 March 1932 to musician parents; his Danish father was a violinist and his Icelandic mother a pianist. This is the latest release that continues Danacord's *in memoriam* tribute to him, for Erling Blöndal Bengtsson passed away on the morning of 6 June 2013. He was 81. This current release is the last tribute to Bengtsson using recordings from Danish Radio (the first is on DACOCD 727, with music by Barber, Salomon and Niels Viggo Bentzon).

The wide range of music that Bengtsson played included the great unaccompanied works by J. S. Bach (the Suites) and Kodály (the Sonata), the notable duosonatas with piano (not least those by Beethoven and Brahms) and the illustrious concertos, such as those by Elgar and Dvořák and also Haydn and Schumann. Bengtsson's playing was much admired for its stylishness, distinctive timbre and many subtle colours and inflections, as well as his trademark impeccable intonation. Bengtsson was also noted for his infallible memory and his impressive technical facility.

At the age of 16, Bengtsson was accepted

as a pupil at the renowned Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. There he studied with the distinguished Russian cellist Gregor Piatigorsky (1903-76). Bengtsson made quite an impression on Piatigorsky (who played with such legendary musicians as violinist Jascha Heifetz and pianist Arthur Rubinstein) – enough for the master to invite his pupil to be his assistant (Bengtsson also taught at Curtis, between 1950 and 1952) and for him to later cite Bengtsson as a role model for his subsequent students.

It's not every cellist who is afforded the tribute of a statue. Bengtsson is an exception though. Because this musician and pedagogue was held in such high esteem throughout Scandinavia, an imposing bronze statue q8!Qim (by Olöf Palsdottir) graces the entrance to Reykjavik's main concert hall (HARPA) in Iceland's capital city. Not that Bengtsson restricted himself to the areas of his Northern birth, for he performed and taught regularly in Europe, the Americas and in Russia, and collaborated with many leading orchestras and conductors across the globe. As well as the established repertoire for his instrument, Bengtsson essayed numerous rare and contemporary pieces (including several concertos written for him), not

least the celebrated Cello Concerto by Witold Lutosławski (1913-94), composed for Rostropovich, which Bengtsson played several times with the composer conducting, as he also did for William Walton's Cello Concerto.

This current last release embracing Danish Radio recordings of Bengtsson feature six cello concertos by Danish composers (in Svendsen's case, adopted). That by Bent Lorentzen (1984) opens in arresting style and proves to be continually striking and ear-grabbing, and benefits from the forensic study of the score by Oliver Knussen, a gold-star conductor of new music. Of the four movements, the composer said the second "touches the mysterious and the macabre ... the soloist adds his collegiate absurdities." Of the finale, it features "grotesque clowns."

Thomas Jensen conducts the concerto by Leif Thybo (1959), another intriguing piece, an ambitious single movement, and a further example of an imaginative composer exploring invention, sound and, here, the lyrical relationship between a soloist and a colourful orchestra, not least many poetic and scenic asides and a flexible approach to musical argument

and architecture. Svend Westergaard's concerto (1961) is dedicated to Bengtsson. It's a rhapsodic and impassioned piece, of a similar length to the Thybo if in the traditional three movements.

Heading up disc 2 are two Fantasy Pieces by Peter Heise, romantic story-telling music, featuring pianist Nina Kavtaradze (EBB's daughter in law), and then it's back to concertos, staying in the nineteenth century for Neruda's D minor example from 1887 ... if you like Saint-Saëns... Whereas Emil Hartmann's also D minor piece (1879) is similarly tuneful and picturesque. Although Johan Svendsen was born in Norway he lived mostly in Copenhagen and saw himself as Danish; like his contemporaries just mentioned, Svendsen gives the cello the romantic lead in his 1871 concerto.

Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations needs no introduction, elegant and diverse music heard here in Fitzenhagen's (preferable?) rewrite (he was the original cellist) performed here by EBB and Monteux many years before Tchaikovsky's original score made something of a comeback.

© Colin Anderson

This is the final volume of rare and never before released broadcast recordings with the cellist Erling Blöndal Bengtsson. Many years back he recorded the Bach solo cello suites for Danacord and the release made it into the Guinness Book of the 1000 best ever recordings. Since then Erling recorded most of the standard repertoire for Danacord from concertos over sonatas to works for solo cello. Every release has remained in the catalogue ever since. Erling had one of the largest repertoires of cellists. He gave first performance of numerous contemporary composers' works, most dedicated to Erling and played innumerable works for cello in public or via broadcasts for the first time, bringing cello music to a large and appreciative audience. In fact, Erling never refrained from doing an extra effort for often-difficult music mixing it with his beloved Bach in recitals all over the world. It is impossible to count the number of works receiving first performances and the many concertos Erling played in numerous concert halls. Danacord was his preferred record company, even if he was open to other recording offers and we, at Danacord, continued to work closely with Erling until his fatal stroke. A phone call from his wife Merete

Blöndal Bengtsson announced the tragic end to one of the most illustrious and musically gigantic careers ever noted among Danish musicians.

As mentioned, Erling performed and recorded for all the Scandinavian broadcasting systems, together with European one in a.o. Germany and the UK. It was obvious that if we had to bring out more recordings showing the art of Erling Blöndal Bengtsson; we had to start looking into what was kept in the archives of the various broadcasting systems. His devoted wife Merete initiated the project and Erling was fully aware what we wanted: to release works he did not record commercially and which gave a broader picture of his vast musical canvas. First to come to our rescue was the Icelandic Radio. Unselfishly they immediately opened the door to their archives and made copies of all the recordings they had kept with Erling. Not only that, but they also made the master copies and totally refrained asking for any payment for releasing these precious live recordings. It was, as the Icelandic Radio movingly pointed out, "A Tribute To Erling Blöndal Bengtsson." Our series could not have begun on a warmer and more heartfelt level since Iceland was the

place that gave the young Erling the support to conquer the world and where he in the end was laid to rest.

After Iceland both the Swedish and the Norwegian broadcasting systems combed their archives for recordings featuring Erling Blöndal Bengtsson. As with the previous three Icelandic tributes our aim was to find music Erling did not record commercially and which was of interest to people who admired his art. Both countries came up with material enough to release two double-CD sets. There were expenses involved from the copying of the masters to the actual issues, but generously and without hesitation Merete herself paid for these releases. Here it is worth mentioning that none of the musicians working with Erling from orchestras to chamber music partners demanded anything else than a free copy of the final CDs. The respect of and the sheer awe of admiration for the utterly unique cellist never ceased to amaze Merete and I.

As mentioned the Swedish and Norwegian radio systems only demanded a minor fee to cover the basic expenses and due to this willingness to forfeit any financial gain on these radio recordings it was possible

to bring this Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson out on compact discs.

Not so with the Danish Radio.

After waiting for over half a year to get a response about the recordings gathering dust in their archives the Danish Radio grabbed the opportunity to capitalise on their tape archive and demanded an inexplicable and extortionate fee only for giving the permission to use the tapes. Not as in the other Scandinavian broadcasting systems where perfect copies were delivered of the original master tapes, the Danish Radio could not find time to make these copies. After lengthy negotiations Danacord borrowed the original tapes and the brilliant sound engineer Claus Byrith worked around the clock to make copies before the Danish Radio demanded the tapes back on the dusty shelves. Historically the Danish Radio used Erling continuously for many years to play music they programmed and planned for their concerts and Erling only cancelled a single performance. Over the years many shelves were filled with his cello performances, but to this day only a very small handful were secured digitally ready to be used for a broadcast. All in all this common and petty chasing

of income from tapes which the Danish Radio had no interest whatsoever made it impossible to make a DR Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson without the massive and overwhelmingly support of private foundations. They all came forward with financial help to pay the bills from the demanding Danish Radio. Had it not been for the magnanimity of Oticon Fonden, the Augustinus Fond, the Beckett Fond, Aage og Johanne Louis-Hansen Fond, Konsul George Jorck og Hustru Emma Jorck's Fond and the Dansk Musiker Forbund we will never in a million years have been able to relive the broadcasts Erling did for nearly fifty years.

So many people came forward in this project and supported us, gave us the information needed and spend hours in archives, clippings and by seeking additional information from friends and colleagues. Erling was not only a lucky man being married to Merete, but after his passing she used all her energy to bring this Tribute series into reality, often working during the small hours and never being stingy when financial help was needed. Now, how often can you say that even about the closest supporters! Claus Byrith made all the transfers and

masters of this long series and was the calm and analytical ears to the recordings, which were all unique and could never be remade. It is a fact that the sound from these CDs are the best possible and the amount of studio hours Claus Byrith spent also shows his love of the art of Erling. The journalist Jens Cornelius came forward like a magician with information no-one else could locate and was a never-ending believer in the project and whipping up encouragement when needed. There is a long line of people who deserve the biggest gratitude and only space forbids us to mention all the names. But you know who you are and what you did.

Bringing out live recordings often over long years always unveils the question if the artist was good enough on the day, if things went well or if the performance lived up to expectation. Loads of tapes from musicians remain on the shelves for the simple reason that they had an off day, or something did not click, or circumstances made it impossible for them to offer the best. Erling was of a different kind: he always performed on a very high level. There were orchestras he preferred and conductors more willing to listen. There were composers closer to his

heart and there were certainly venues with a more refreshing acoustic and probably a more silent audience, but none of it, not even the smallest obstacle, influenced his playing. He always gave himself one-hundred percent and he was always fully committed to the music. What a treat to be able to choose from so many recordings without ever fearing that the cellist would not be up to scratch. If anything these many Tribute CDs shows the consistently high level a musician can reach. It is tempting so say, there were only two in history who never gave a bad performance: Jascha Heifetz and Erling Blöndal Bengtsson. The proof is here.

Jesper Buhl

- a selection of the many CD releases featuring Erling Blöndal Bengtsson:

Erling Blöndal Bengtsson: Recordings

A Gramophone Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson DACOCD 738

A SR Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson. Hans holewa, Karl-Birger Blomdahl, Ingvar Lidholm, Kurt Atterberg, Henry Eccles, E. Bloch, Dag Wirén, Juli Garreta DACOCD 778

A NRK Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson. Brahms. D. Shostakovich Klaus Egge, Elgar, Grieg, Ketil Hvoslev. DACOCD 780

A Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson. Dmitri Shostakovch, Richard Strauss, Luciano Berio, György Ligeti, Sven-Erik Bäck, N.V.Bentzon. DACOCD 844

A Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson. Robert Schumann, N.V. Bentzon, Jan Maegaard, Gunnar Berg, Gaspar Cassado, H.D. Koppel, Albert Roussel, Leif Thybo, Gabriel Fauré, E. Bloch. DACOCD 845

A Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson. Bent Lorentzen, Leif Thybo, Svend Westergaard, Peter Heise, Neruda, Emil Hartmann, Johan Svendsen, P. Tschaikovsky. DACOCD 846

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DAC OCD 846

STEREO ADD

2 CD

Total playing time 156:26

All recordings released
with the permission of
the Danish Radio

Digital mastering:
Claus Byrith

Produced by Merete
Blöndal Bengtsson

Executive producer:
Jesper Buhl

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(LC 07075)



For this last volume of recordings emanating from Danish Radio, Erling Blöndal Bengtsson plays six cello concertos, all by Danish composers, exhibiting a wide range of styles, from romantic to modern. Conductors include Thomas Jensen and Oliver Knussen. Also included is Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations, conducted by the legendary Pierre Monteux. Once again, Bengtsson's open-mindedness, versatility, impeccable technique and sterling musicianship are presented as part of an infallible showcase.

CD 1 79:36

Bent Lorentzen (1925-2018)

Cello Concerto (1984) 24:29

[1] I 8:59	[2]	III 5:22
[3] II 3:36	[4]	IV 6:32

Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra

Conductor: Oliver Knussen

Live Concert, Danish Radio Studio 1, April 4, 1986
Producer: Hans Henrik Holm

Leif Thybo (1922-2001)

[5] **Cello Concerto (1959)** 32:25

Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra

Conductor: Thomas Jensen

Live Concert, Danish Radio Studio 1, May 28, 1962

Svend Westergaard (1922-1988)

Cello Concerto Op. 26 (1961) 32:13

[6] Adagio molto - moderato ma con fuoco 11:02

[7] Adagio - allegro con brio - adagio 9:04

[8] Finale: Vivo 12:06

Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra

Conductor: Ole Schmidt

Studio production January, 1973. Producer: Peter Willemoes

CD 2 76:50

Peter Heise (1830-1879)

2 Fantasy Pieces (1860) 7:14

[1] Agitato ed appassionato 3:50

[2] Allegretto con espressione 3:23

Nina Kavtaradze, piano

Live Concert March 29, 1987. Producer: Bent Grønholdt

Franz Xaver Neruda (1834-1915)

[3] **Cello Concerto No. 2 in D minor Op. 59 (1887)** 14:37

Aalborg Symphony Orchestra

Conductor: Alf Sjøen

Studio Production May 28, 1970

Producer: Carl Emil Jungild. Recorded by Niels Fleron

Emil Hartmann (1836-1898)

Cello Concerto in D minor, Op. 26 (1879) 17:35

[4] Allegro moderato 8:42

[5] Canzonetta 2:38

[6] Rondo pastorale 6:14

Odense Symphony Orchestra

Conductor: Børge Wagner

Studio Production May 15, 1970

Producer: Carl Emil Jungild. Recorded by Børge Knudsen

Johan Svendsen (1840-1911)

Cello Concerto Op. 7 (1870-1871) 18:35

[7] Allegro 6:36

[8] Andante 6:54

[9] Tempo 1, Allegro 5:05

Aarhus Symphony Orchestra

Conductor: Ole Schmidt

Live Concert Marselisborghallen, Aarhus, May 27, 1982

Producer: Henrik Sleiborg

Piotr Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

[10] **Variations on a Rococo Theme Op. 35 (1877)** 18:17

Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra

Conductor: Pierre Monteux

Live Concert, Danish Radio Studio One, September 7, 1962

Erling Blöndal Bengtsson, cello