Erling Blöndal Bengtsson, Professor of Cello, will retire this spring. Fifteen years ago, when he and his wife Merete arrived in Ann Arbor from the couple’s native Denmark, Bengtsson already had a long and illustrious career behind him, as performer and recording artist not only in Denmark but throughout Europe and beyond.

In a 1994 interview with Professor Bengtsson in *Music @ Michigan*, the cellist said that when the offer to teach at Michigan came, “It was time to make a change. I had been teaching at the Royal Conservatory since I was 21. . . We realized that if we were to make a change, it had to happen now. They were really wonderful at the Conservatory when I left,” he said, “both the students and the director. Apparently they were sorry to see me leave, and that is the best sign. Better than ‘Why don’t you leave now?’!”

And even though he won’t be “retiring” per se—he’s leaving to devote more attention to performing—students and colleagues alike will miss the man who has become a vital presence at the School of Music.

Born in Copenhagen in 1932 into a musical family—his father a violinist, his mother a pianist—Bengtsson was presented with a violin at the age of three. When he refused to play the instrument the way it was intended, under the chin—he would only play it between the knees—his father added an end-pin to create a make-shift cello. A year later, a mini-cello was custom made for him.

In 1946, something happened that would change the course of his life. At the age of 14, he was invited to play with the Chamber Music Society of Reykjavik in his mother’s native Iceland. At the end of the evening, at a dinner of celebration, the Chamber Music Society president announced that they intended to make a gift to the young cellist of 100,000 Danish kroner, enough for two years study in America. “Can you imagine, in 1946, with Europe in ruins!” he told *M@M*. “But this is the Icelandic way.”

By 1948, Bengtsson was on his way to America, to study at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia with the legendary Gregor Piatigorsky. “I arrived in the middle of summer,” he recalled, “and was immediately invited to study with him at his summer home in Elizabeth-town in upstate New York. . . He and his wife were like parents to me.” (See portrait of Bengtsson, next page, by Jacqueline Piatigorsky.) When Piatigorsky left Philadelphia for Los Angeles the following year, his young student was asked to take over as cello teacher at Curtis. Four years later, Bengtsson returned to Denmark where he taught at the Royal Conservatory in Copenhagen for some 37 years before coming to Michigan.

As a performing artist, Bengtsson has appeared internationally, both in recital and as soloist, with major orchestras around the world. He has recorded all the Beethoven works for cello and his 1985 recording of the six cello suites of J.S. Bach on the Danish label Danacord was selected as “choice of the year” by the American recording magazine *Fanfare*.

Accolades for Bengtsson over the course of his career include knighthood in both Denmark and Iceland and membership in the Royal Swedish Academy of Music. He was named *Chevalier du Violoncelle* by Indiana University School of Music in 1993 and received the Award of Distinction in 2001 from the Manchester Inter...
national Cello Festival. Just last year, he was named Premier Master Cellist 2005 by the Detroit Cello Society.

Listen to what the critics have said. The London Times: “He has warmth, security and a supreme elegance about his playing that captivated all who heard it.” The Los Angeles Times: “His style mingles an edgeless, mellow tone and unerring technical facility with an expansive temperament congenial to a broad spectrum of expressive demands.” In the Ann Arbor Observer in 2003, James Leonard wrote, “Bengtsson has a technique second to none and a tone as rich and warm as late summer.”

Here’s what a few of his former students have to say about their professor.

“When I first met Mr. Bengtsson, I came away thinking I’d never met such a distinguished and elegant person. When I first heard him play, I was so exhilarated because I’d never before heard such a distinguished and elegant performance! I’ve never encountered any string player who uses the bow as he does, with such freedom and character. His complete ease with the repertoire is astonishing, from early to contemporary, virtuoso showpieces to the profound. Some of my favorite moments involved the ‘wow’ factor that his students used to joke about—he could pick up your cello and demonstrate anything you brought to your lesson, at a breathtaking quality, and always by heart! My studies with him had a dramatic impact on my music making. The ability to infuse the smallest cell with expression—a hallmark of his playing—is something for which I continually strive, and which I try to impart to my own students. I will be forever grateful to Mr. Bengtsson for my years with him, and I thank him for being the teacher and friend that he is.”

Felix Wang, DMA ’98
Assistant Professor of Cello, Vanderbilt University

“I think that one of the most valuable lessons I learned from Erling was that if I believe I can do something on the cello, I can! I don’t think I had ever before met someone who plays as effortlessly and eloquently, as if communicating through the instrument is easier than speaking with words. In my lessons, he would often demonstrate by playing through a piece. I always felt incredibly privileged to be given a preview of the greatness that most people only get to see in concerts. It seems that in those private performances, nothing was left unsaid, and afterward I simply knew what needed to be done. I could feel the direct connection to the great cellists of the past—Casals, Piatigorsky, Cassado. Erling would speak of them with such respect and fondness, as if they would pop around the corner anytime for a visit. I am very lucky to have ended up in Ann Arbor where I can still be under the influence of his grace and elegance, and honored to have a continued relationship as a friend.”

Katri Ervamaa, DMA ’00, Director, U-M Residential College Music Program

“Professor Erling Blöndal Bengtsson is truly a remarkable cellist and teacher, and a passionate and inspirational musician whose interpretational superiority results from an exceptional musical intuition based on the quality of his convictions, his broad knowledge of music, and his love for the cello. Oscar Wilde once said, ‘The role of an artist is to continually astound.’ That was just what Professor Bengtsson did, even in lessons; he astounded me with his musical ideas which undoubtedly nurtured my curiosity, creativity, and maturity as a musician and instilled in me a passion and respect for music. Working with Professor Bengtsson has been more than a true honor and I am thankful to have been given the opportunity to know not just an outstanding cellist but also an extraordinary musician.”

Noella Yan, MM ’05
Melbourne, Australia

“Erling Blöndal Bengtsson is one of the century’s finest cellists. I had the privilege of working with him for one year at the University of Michigan—a year of great inspiration, constant encouragement, and unequalled mentorship. Bengtsson is a great man and an exceptional human being whose artistry shines through his everyday life and affects all around him.”

Thomas Landschoot, MM ’00
Assistant Professor of Music, Arizona State University