

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Cello and the Nightingale

Patricia Cleveland Peck  
Theatre Royal, York  
(2004)

"Madam, your womb is a veritable conservatoire!" said Sir Thomas Beecham to the mother of cellist Beatrice Harrison and her three musically gifted sisters. Rather an indelicate remark for its era, but how it must have gladdened the heart of Mrs Harrison - a woman whose pride in her talented daughters led her to put them through the musical equivalent of an SAS training regime. Of the four only Beatrice achieved real fame, and forty years after her death she is best remembered for duetting with a nightingale in the BBC's first outside broadcast.

Author Patricia Cleveland Peck was a friend of the Harrison family and has also written a biography of the cellist. Her play opens with Beatrice (Brigit Forsyth), now an elderly recluse in failing health, still obsessively practicing the cello for hours as she dwells on her childhood and brilliant career. Her sisters, the gentle Monica ([Tamara Ustinov](#)) and tweedy Margaret (Alwyne Taylor), have long ago abandoned their careers and independence to devote themselves to Beatrice, supporting themselves by that traditional occupation of impoverished English gentlewomen - breeding dogs. May (Frances Jeater), the only sibling to have made a life of her own, is appalled by her sisters' subservience to Beatrice and insists that the cello which made her a household name but is now draining her strength be sold; as the lights go down we see Beatrice playing for what is presumably the last time whilst May prepares to deliver the bad news.

It has to be said that anyone expecting a drama about raging artistic temperaments and passionate love affairs will be disappointed; Harrison was no Jacqueline du Pré and the only male in her life appears to have been her cello "Peter". This is a gentle, elegaic little play in which Peck successfully conjures up the musical world of Edwardian England, the early days of the BBC (the legendary "nightingale broadcast" is delightfully recreated) and, above all, the suffocating atmosphere of a household in which one genius seems to have blossomed at great personal cost to three talents. Ustinov, Taylor and Jeater not only give memorable performances as the sisters but also appear as a host of supporting characters including Sir John Reith and Dame Nellie Melba! Brigit Forsyth gives a deeply moving performance as Beatrice, or - to be more precise - as Beatrice at various stages of her life: the teenage prodigy, the mature musician and the old woman on the brink of senility. And not content with being a fine actress she is also an accomplished cellist.

Thanks to Susan Stern's well-paced direction it comes as something of a shock to realize that the play is barely an hour long - one wonders if Peck might not have made a little more of other aspects of the sisters' lives, particularly when she casually refers to Beatrice forging love letters from her mother to her father, May's affair with a married man and Margaret's relationship with a pretty kennel maid Siobhan Ferrie's simple but beautiful set, a tilted picture frame on which images of flowers, woodland and a cellist's hands are projected, perfectly compliments the mood of the play. As I took my seat in the Studio I wondered, not for the first time, how the Theatre Royal managed for so long without this marvellous little performance space. A chamber piece such as

*The Cello and the Nightingale* could have been written with the Studio in mind, and if you've never been before now is the time to start.

*"The Cello and the Nightingale" runs until 5th June*

**Reviewer:** [J. D. Atkinson](#)