

Musick has Charms to sooth a savage Breast,
William Congreve

Music as Complement to Surgery
by David J. Elpern

Abstract: Dermatologists perform office surgery almost daily. Our awareness of the growing interest in, and literature on, music as an adjunct in the perioperative period led us to survey the use of music during 100 consecutive office procedures in a dermatology practice. We found that the effects of music were salutary for patients and the investigators alike. Music is a simple, inexpensive, safe and effective adjunct to office surgery. We hope that this investigation will be of be a guide for physicians who wish to provide music to ease patients during office procedures.

Keywords: music, medicine, surgery, perioperative, playlists, dermatologist, dermatology

A chance meeting in 2011 with an old friend, ophthalmologist Timothy Lee, in an Indian restaurant on Kauai, led to a discussion of his collaboration with Dr. Jorge Camara playing keyboard in the operating room for patients undergoing ophthalmic procedures.¹ Both of these eye surgeons had studied and practiced classical piano for many years. Camara and his colleagues found that “live classical piano music lowered the blood pressure, heart rate, and respiratory rate in patients undergoing ophthalmic surgery.” Tim Lee’s comments led me to reflect upon this issue.

I wondered whether music as medicine would be of value during the minor surgeries I perform in my dermatology practice and reflected on whether music might help those patients who were under my knife or curette. Since talking with Tim, over the past two of years I have offered patients music during office surgery. It did, indeed, seem to “soothe the savage Breast.” To investigate this further, I elected to scrutinize a 100 consecutive patients offered music during office procedures.

Methods:

Since neither my assistant nor I, unlike Drs. Lee and Camara, are musicians, I initially elected to play recorded music during all surgeries except short punch or shave biopsies. Towards the end of the study, it was clear that

most patients appreciated music as medicine, and so we offered music for most punch biopsies as well.

In most studies on music and surgery, the compositions selected are the surgeons' choice, but it seemed to me that the music was for the patients' comfort, and so, the patient should be "the decider."

An extremely varied selection of music is available from Spotify and Pandora, so virtually anything a patient requests is available.^{2,3} I would ask the patient, "What kind of music would you like to listen to during your surgery?" If they were not sure, I'd ask them, what they would play at home if they wanted to relax.

An arbitrary figure of 100 consecutive patients was chosen.

Results:

From September to December 2013 we entered 100 patients in the survey. The raw data can be viewed in Table I, II and III (see Appendix)

The Female:Male ratio was roughly equal. Patient ages ranged from three to 93. All but three participants were Caucasian in keeping with the local Western Massachusetts demographics.

Thirty-two subjects chose classical music, 13 requested Country Western, 12 asked for Rock or Pop. Seven people, 6 women and one man, did not care for music. There were 33 miscellaneous choices and one entry was illegible.

Discussion:

Dermatologists perform office surgery on an almost daily basis. We recognize that some patients view these, often minor, procedures with a degree of trepidation. A chance meeting with an old friend introduced us to the concept of using music as "medicine" to enhance patient satisfaction during procedures. It is that rare no-risk, no side-effect, no-cost intervention that can have positive emotional, spiritual and psychological sequelae.

We modified our colleague's operating room protocol to fit our dermatology office and our lack of keyboard skills. The availability of an almost unlimited selection of music on the programs Pandora and Spotify have made it possible to tailor the musical experience of patients undergoing minor surgery in a physician's office.^{2,3}

There is a growing literature on music as an adjunct in the perioperative period which we were unaware of when we started our survey. While we had patients choose the compositions, music therapists and researchers feel that the perioperative music should be "expert-selected" to assure that the most calming and soothing melodies are provided.⁴

Not being an accomplished musician, I surmised that the patients should select what would best soothe them during a procedure. As we refine the way we use music in the surgical setting, it is likely that our selections will be modified to include calming playlists based, not just on expert choices, but on patient preferences as well. It will be easy to develop generic playlists of the most requested genres, namely classical, country western, rock, pop. For patients who prefer more esoteric melodies, wide-ranging online resources are available.^{2,3}

Research on music as medicine suggests that therapeutically effective musical parameters should “contain sustained (smooth) melodies, a general absence of strong rhythms, limited percussive instruments, and no lyrics.”⁴

Another approach is to allow patients to select what *they* resonate with. It is possible that patient preference might better suit some individuals than having "experts" choose for them."

This was not conceived of as a scientific study. The purpose was to try to ascertain if music as medicine made the patient's surgical experience more pleasant, not to measure physiology or pain control. We like the term “High Touch, Low Tech.”

When asked what they'd like to listen to, many patients were, at first, bemused. Most said, “I don't know. Anything you want; you're the doctor.” I'd then tell them, “The surgery is about you, so you should make the choice.” Given permission, most individuals then chose a genre or a particular composer or performer. Only seven of the 100 finally declined to make a choice or specifically said they preferred no music. One person, aged 84, was “too deaf to hear.”

Early on, in the study, it became clear that music made a big difference to our patients' surgical experience. They seemed calmer and had something to focus on other than what was happening to them. Many discussed the

music they had chosen during the procedure and directly afterwards. It had a salutary effect on my assistant and me as well.

Nearly one-third of the patients chose classical music and significant numbers chose country western and rock and pop. There were 28 miscellaneous choices, which was less than the number of patients who asked for classical pieces.

An unexpected outcome of this study was that some patients then became our teachers. They would expound on the music they selected or how they became interested in a given piece or artist. There was the patient that introduced us to the blind harmonica player [Sonny Terry](#) and the 86 year-old owner of a hot dog joint whose Greek immigrant mother loved opera. When his friends were at baseball games, his mother dragged his siblings and him all over the East Coast to attend operas. He chose Ravel's Bolero and told us how it was received at its U.S. premier in 1929.

A particularly memorable patient was an eight year-old girl who was seen for excision of an atypical Spitz nevus on her calf. When asked what she wanted to listen to, she replied, in a millisecond, "Taylor Swift." During the local anesthesia injection and the twenty-minute procedure, she chatted with my assistant in an animated manner about a Taylor Swift concert she attended. She did not appear to notice the procedure and smiled throughout it. Not all patients do this well with music and surgery, but early on it became clear that a musical accompaniment to office surgery helped many of our patients and, to date, has had no known adverse effects.

As we move ahead with our music and medicine investigation, we are formulating playlists for patients who decline to choose a specific piece or genre. Individuals who know what they want to hear will have their selections provided. The playlists will be made available to physicians who wish to provide a soothing ambiance for their patients. This informal study has confirmed, H.W. Longfellow's statement, "Music is the universal language of mankind." We observed it connecting in soothing tunes to our surgical patients.

References:

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