
THE SOFT EDGES

The Theatre of Music – Chris Ellis

As a fair weather general practitioner anaesthetist I have played to a variety of audiences over the years. Since the days when I trained on ether, my Boyle's machine seems to have collected an additional monitor or meter or dial each year. I now feel like a high tech organ grinder's monkey.

When I started, the function of the anaesthetist was to keep the patient on the table, tell jokes, and quote from the stock market prices or keep everyone informed of the test score. Now I am too busy playing with all these machines. Some of them bleep and others hiss while tracings chase each other across screens. When they go wrong it looks like a jazz festival in an electric storm. It scares me so much that I have decided to add one more piece to the rest – a music centre to sublimate these metronomic bleeps and soothe my nerves. It will fit rather nicely under the ventilator.

Music in the theatre is not new as from time to time surgeons have brought in their own music. In the earlier days the theatre sister wound up His Master's Voice and in more recent times there is the latest in stereophonic pop. The question thus arises as to what sort of music should be played.

I have spent some considerable time in canvassing surgeons as to what type of music should be played to which operations. Mind you, surgeons are not necessarily noted for their musicality. The average surgeon's repertoire doesn't extend much beyond humming, heavy breathing and occasional outbreaks of whistling. They can in fact reply in a rather offhand and offensive manner when asked these sort of questions at 2.00 a.m. while repairing ruptured livers.

I could of course extend this theme to the rest of the hospital with appropriate canned music for each department. There would be nursery rhymes in the paediatric ward, the Acceleration Waltz from the labour ward and harp music for the mortuary. I'm leaving that for another day and concentrating on the programme for the operating theatre.

We start with the anaesthetic induction. The patient goes under to the sounds of "Listen to the Ocean, Echoes of a million seashells", or a suitably calming piece such as Greensleeves, or my favourite "I hear as in a Dream" from Bizet's, The Pearl Fishers.

The general surgical list is first.

Appendectomy. The Overture to Der Rosenkavalier by Richard Strauss has been chosen as it is a slippery little piece which needs some concentration in the middle and the rest is tripe.

Cholecystectomy. This is accompanied by Czardas by Monti. The gallstones are removed to the sounds of the tambourines rattling away to a belching colicky gypsy dance with some nice emetic sequences from the brass.

Haemorrhoidectomy. There were several contenders for this with "Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport" winning by a short tail.

Orchidectomy. This obviously goes to Tchaikovsky's overture, "The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" from the Nutcracker Suite played with patella hammers on a zylophone.

Cautery to Planter Warts. These can sizzle away to Theodorakis's Zorba's

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Dance. The tune is catchy and you may even see the patient actually performing in the dance in the recovery room.

The following list is an orthopaedic one.

The orthopaedic surgeons rejected "Nick Nack Paddy Wack Give a Dog a Bone" out of hand. Being a rather noisy and rambunctious lot they have been awarded Beethoven's "1812" overture or Verdi's "Anvil Chorus" from *Il Travatore*. A late request for "If I had a Hammer" was turned down.

In a theatre further down the corridor are the neurosurgeons. They are in contrast in a quiet contemplative mood. Tchaikovsky's "Romance in F" is playing to heads bent in concentration. The thin precise woodwind notes can just be heard as they gently cross the synapses along with the distant clarinets as they echo down the ventricles.

The afternoon slate is below the keyboard; urogenital and gynaecology. The urologists feel that the appropriate theme for a transurethral prostatectomy is Coates's "The Dam Busters March" and for a vasectomy is "Another one bites the Dust". The gynaecologists on the other hand consider that a tubal ligation would go nicely to "There ain't going to be no more, no more". I have also reserved for them Beethoven's "Erotica" and "Saturday Night Fever" for an incomplete septic abortion. The rush of an emergency Caesarean Section has been allocated Bizet's "Jeux D'Enfants" with its short trumpet fanfares and the rising crescendos from the violins in ever increasing scales till the delivery.

There are other entries from the superspecialities.

The plastic surgeons have asked for "Mammaries are Made of This" and the psychiatrists feel that electroconvulsive therapy must sound like Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite" resounding through the cerebral hemispheres.

The cardiac surgeons required something stirring on the scale of "Land of Hope and Glory" or the complete opposite ie something soft and romantic so we have put in Rubenstein's "Melody in F" for them as well. The transplanters are working along the lines of "My Heart belongs to Daddy."

The most debate has been over one of the smallest operations of all - Circumcision. The judges final decision went to Offenbach's "Fiddling on the Champs Elysees". It is a virtuoso piece with some nice flourishes from the flutes. The triangle comes in for the trimming and tidying up at the end with some fine touches from the plucked violins.

Apart from these appropriate pieces, music can be used for other functions. If there is a slow surgeon ponderously lifting coil after coil of intestine you can subtly increase the tempo or put on a quick march. They unwittingly speed up. Conversely when the mood is tense and he sticks the needle in his finger, just turn up the volume.

The function of music, said Sir Thomas Beecham the conductor, is to release us from the tyranny of conscious thought. He must have had some pretty long lists to anaesthetise in his time.
