



As every television watcher knows, surgery is conducted by impossibly good-looking men and women to the strains of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* or the croonings of Elvis. But in the real world, is the operating theatre really a melodic haven? Not according to a debate that broke out upon the letters page of the *Medical Journal of Australia* (MJA) last year.

Richard H Riley, an anaesthetist, reported that surgeons were pushing the use of music technology a little too far. One had asked that a monitor and video cassette player be brought into the operating theatre then popped in a videotape of an opera, to which he watched and listened as he operated. Another brought in his own MP3 player, put in ear bud earphones and, though asked by the anaesthetist whether "it might interfere with communication or concentration", kept the ear plugs in.

A retired anaesthetist, Douglas N Gow, wrote in saying that 'the selfish attitude of many surgeons towards our communal working environment' was the main factor that drove him out of anaesthetic practice and into the houseboat business.

What about here in Hong Kong: is surgical melody a cause of disharmony? Is music even played in Hong Kong operating theatres and if so, what type, who chooses, are there any specialty trends, and who, if anyone, has right of refusal?

A quick and highly unscientific survey of the *Hong Kong Medical Journal* editorial board found that indeed, many of our surgeons are passionate about their music. Chinese popular music, particularly 'cantopop' was the first choice, but most said they brought in a wide range of CDs so their staff could choose. Democracy seems to be a more powerful factor in Hong Kong operating theatres than in the Australian ones that Drs Kirby and Gow toiled in. Some Hong Kong surgeons encourage their junior residents and nursing staff to bring in their favourites so theatre lists become a musical adventure.

Dr Paul BS Lai of the Department of Surgery, The

Chinese University of Hong Kong says opening up the choice means he gets to listen to "a wide range of music from canto-pop, classicals, Japanese pops, mandarin pops, and all the way to Chinese Opera."

"If there is anybody complaining against a certain type of music we will get rid of it and play something else. Everybody can have a say, including the anaesthetists."

Dr Wai-ka Hung, a Hospital Authority general surgeon even does a walk-around in the theatre to see who is working and to gauge the mood before deciding which, if any, CD to pop into the sound system that day. "I keep about 40-50 CDs in my locker so I have plenty to choose from...the anaesthetists and nurses that I work with are usually very tolerant to the music that I have chosen."

Conventional wisdom might suggest that, as certain personality types favour certain specialties, musical tastes may do the same. Do orthopaedic surgeons like heavy metal while paediatric surgeons favour light and happy Japanese pop? No such trends have been revealed, as the following tale of two liver surgeons attests.

One always brought his own portable cassette player to theatre and loved Elvis Presley. According to one of his former juniors, this surgeon "simply could not operate without the music...occasionally he would sing along but his voice was obviously not as good as Elvis."

The other liver surgeon was the exact opposite. He demanded absolute quiet in the operating theatre and never allowed any music. "The only possible sounds were (1) the "beep" from the anaesthetic machine corresponding to the heart rate of the patients and (2) the jokes that he cracked and the laughter from his assistants that followed. 'Too scary' was one of the many descriptions of the atmosphere of that operating room."

Music may not always soothe the anaesthetic breast, but it certainly does something for surgeons. A 1994 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that music improves surgeons' speed, accuracy, and tranquility. Operators are not the only beneficiaries. Those being operated on do better, according to Dr Danny WH Lee and colleagues who, in 2000, studied the effect of providing patients undergoing colonoscopy at North District Hospital with a personal CD player (and a choice of CDs). The outcome measure was level of sedation required, and, sure enough, those patients given the CD players needed less sedation.

And while studying the effect of music on sedation requirements, Lee et al came up with another important finding: Hong Kong patients, like their surgeons, prefer cantopop. So from the consumers' perspective, anyway, melodies heard in our operating theatres are indeed creating harmony.

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