

Eye love music

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This essay reflects on the profound significance of vision in the human experience and its essential role in creativity and quality of life. It delves into the emotional challenges faced by patients confronting vision loss and the anxieties associated with eye surgery. The narrative highlights how music, played in the operating room, provides comfort and familiarity, transforming a clinical environment into one that feels personal and human. Through humor and insight, the piece underscores the power of the arts to soothe, connect, and elevate the patient experience.

As I walk home from the hospital during the spring and summer months, I make a point of passing through the Public Gardens. Sunlight filters through the trees and illuminates the vivid contrast between the deep green leaves and the bright blooming flowers. The symmetry of the flowerbeds and the movement of branches in the breeze draw my attention in ways I often take for granted. Each plant, tree, and flower has its own distinct shape and color palette, and on these walks, I am reminded of the profound privilege of sight. The beauty around me offers a temporary escape from the mountain of studying awaiting me at home.

A 2019 cross sectional survey by Enoch et al. demonstrated that sight was the most valued sense by the general public of the United Kingdom.¹ This sentiment is understandable; vision permits us to interact with virtually everything around us. When vision begins to fade, the decline in quality of life can be steep, and often underestimated by those who do not experience it firsthand.^{2,3} The psychological sequelae of vision loss can be underappreciated. Patients living with vision loss often experience higher rates of anxiety and depression.⁴ With aging populations, the prevalence of vision loss continues to increase.⁴ One of my mentors, a vitreoretinal surgeon, shared that some of his patients express a deep fear of losing their vision because it would disrupt their ability to be creative. Whether painting, playing music, or making crossword puzzles, vision allows us to engage in the humanities in ways that are deeply meaningful. Unsurprisingly, many patients place a high value on preserving their sight, and for some, this includes pursuing surgical intervention.⁵

Entering the operating room (OR) for eye surgery is understandably daunting for patients. Unlike most surgical

specialties where general anesthesia provides complete unconsciousness, most ophthalmic procedures are performed under local anesthesia and anxiolytic agents for comfort. As a result, patients remain awake throughout the operation. For some, the anxiety stems not from the surgery itself but from the idea of being conscious while it happens. So how can we ease that fear?

During my first year of medical school, I completed an elective in ophthalmology. My first day was spent in the OR. Until then, my knowledge of what happens in the OR came from television shows like *House* and *The Good Doctor*. As a student, you try to learn as much as possible without disrupting the efficiency of the environment you find yourself in. I remember feeling a mix of excitement and uncertainty, trying to take in everything that was happening while quietly reminding myself not to touch anything sterile. The workflow in the OR is systematic. First, the surgeon conducted a safety check, confirming the patient's details and addressing any concerns from the team. Nurses helped the patient onto the table and prepared the necessary instruments. The anesthesiologist managed IV lines and medication to ease anxiety. Then out of nowhere, a popular Dua Lipa song began to play from an unassuming laptop in the corner of the room. From below the drape, I heard a voice exclaim, "great taste, I love this song!". I quickly realized that the music was not just played for the enjoyment of the surgical team but also for the benefit of the patient.

"One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain", Bob Marley famously said. In the OR, music may actually disrupt the pain pathway by stimulating the auditory system, serving as a valuable non-pharmacological tool for reducing anxiety.⁶ But beyond any po-

tential physiological effects, the true power of music in the OR feels more human. Music is ubiquitous in life; we listen to it with others, while driving or exercising, and it plays in department stores, elevators, and in film and television. To appreciate just how much music shapes our everyday experience, imagine your favourite movie or show without its soundtrack or theme song. Something essential would feel missing; it would not feel complete. In a sense, music is like a companion.

We are comforted by familiarity. For most patients, the OR is an unfamiliar environment; bright, sterile, and filled with equipment, monitors, and busy staff in masks. Music serves as a bridge, transforming the unfamiliar space into something more personal and recognizable. It also establishes common ground between a surgeon and a patient, who may be meeting for the first time on the day of surgery, but who might bond over a shared love for an artist or a genre. In that moment, music can help patients see beyond the fluorescent lights and the intimidating instruments, making them feel more at home in an otherwise sterile setting.

So, what is the best music to play in the OR?

- I Can See Clearly Now – Johnny Nash
- Eye of the Tiger – Survivor
- Brown Eyed Girl – Van Morrison
- Can't Take My Eyes Off You – Lauryn Hill
- Eyes Wide Open – Gotye
- Eyes Like Yours – Shakira
- Iris – The Goo Goo Dolls
- In Your Eyes – The Weeknd
- Eye in the Sky – The Alan Parsons Project
- Ocean Eyes – Billie Eilish

Like any good event, there is also a “no-play list”. Songs NOT to play in the OR (for obvious reasons):

- Blinded by the Light – Manfred Mann's Earth Band
- Blinding Lights – The Weeknd
- She Blinded Me with Science – Thomas Dolby
- I Go Blind – Hootie & the Blowfish
- Can't See at All – WOODS
- I'd Rather Go Blind – Etta James
- I Wish I Were Blind – Bruce Springsteen

As I sit here listening to the soundtrack from Interstellar, my favourite from Hans Zimmer, while I write the conclusion to this piece, I am reminded of how music has the power to transform even the most stressful environments. Patients are often understandably anxious about eye surgery, especially the idea of being awake for it. In these moments, music offers patients a sense of familiarity in the unfamiliar. So, the next time you find yourself in the ophthalmology OR, whether as a patient or part of the team, consider putting on some good tunes. You just might make the experience a little easier for everyone involved.

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