



# Otolaryngology—Head & Neck Surgery

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## Caught Up in the Rapture of Medicine and Music: Dr. Brandon J. Baird’s Journey to Leading the Voice Center

**Brandon J. Baird, MD**, is a dedicated laryngeal surgeon whose specialty covers a broad spectrum of laryngeal diseases, with an emphasis on medical and surgical management of voice and swallowing disorders. He treats phonotraumatic vocal cord lesions, vocal fold paralysis, laryngeal stenosis, laryngeal cancer, spasmodic dysphonia, and recurrent respiratory papillomatosis; additionally, he provides exceptional care to performing and professional voice artists. As a trained singer himself, Dr. Baird understands the importance of expert laryngeal care, and he has the skill and experience to treat professional voice artists for voice conditions.



### Finding the beat

As a child growing up in Washington, DC, with his mom, Dr. Baird was fascinated by medicine and science. Even from a tender age, he knew he wanted to place himself in an environment of innovation and discovery and have the opportunity to help other people. What he didn’t know is that his innate (and palpable) passion for music, which he describes as his “other love,” would meld so seamlessly with his professional life in such a robust and meaningful way. “I think it’s pretty sweet. I grew up playing piano, which I started when I was five, and started singing shortly thereafter,” said Dr. Baird. “I’ve always been in musical groups throughout my life. It’s been a sort of home away from home or escape for me.”

Dr. Baird never ceased to feed his unrelenting desire to be enveloped by the rapture of music. While in college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he was in an a cappella group called the UNC Clef Hangers, which he served as music director; much of the music they performed he arranged himself.

As much as he felt drawn to music in those years, the idea of a career in medicine became equally compelling. So much so that Dr. Baird felt he had to make a choice. Would it be music or medicine? Given his interest in service, helping others, medicine gained favor. Throughout his journey to becoming a surgeon, his love for music always remained in the wings. Sometimes, during quiet evenings when he was a resident on call, Dr. Baird would go to the main lobby to play the hospital

piano. “I would play whenever I could carve out the time, and through this I was able to keep that love of music going during my training,” he said. “Towards the end of my residency, I realized that I still wanted to be able to treat musicians.”

Laryngology, which is a subspecialty of ENT, rose to the top of the list of subspecialty fellowship training options for Dr. Baird. His interest in music, medicine and voice led him to Massachusetts General Hospital, where he trained under Steven Zeitels, MD, the laryngeal surgeon recognized for treating professional performers Julie Andrews, Steven Tyler, Sam Smith, and Adele. Dr. Baird’s fellowship under Dr. Zeitels was illuminating and gratifying. “It was an incredibly rewarding year,” he said. “For the first time in my life since I made that decision in college, I sort of had this reunification of these two loves, medicine and music.”

### The Voice Center

The University of Chicago Medicine Voice Center was created to treat patients with complex vocal pathology, diverse backgrounds in voice and busy performance commitments. The Voice Center’s multidisciplinary team of speech-language pathologists, neurologists, gastroenterologists, pulmonologists, oncologists and laryngeal surgeons lends a holistic approach to voice care for each patient.

One of the most distinguishing aspects of UChicago Medicine’s state-of-the-art Voice Center is that it offers office-based surgeries and procedures. Patients with glottic dysplasia

or papilloma can be treated in the office without the need for general anesthesia and less voice rest time. Another procedure done at the Voice Center is transoral vocal cord injections for vocal cord paralysis. This allows for vocal improvement in patients who have a vocal cord paralysis after surgery or neurologic injury, or idiopathic cause. This allows for the immediate resolution of the voice problem at the time of the patient’s initial visit to the Voice Center. “We can do an injection right there, on the spot, and have them leaving that same day with their voice, which is, I think, pretty special,” said Dr. Baird.

As with many other UChicago Medicine centers and programs, the inimitable Voice Center takes an interdisciplinary approach to treating patients. Dr. Baird and his colleagues Sweta Soni, MA, CCC-SLP; Derek Palmer, MA, CCC-SLP, BCS-S; Meg Thorsen, MA, CCC-SLP; and Ellen McCracken, MS, CCC-SLP, have established a dynamic rapport that allows them to cohesively formulate tailored care plans for each patient.

“They are all extremely talented and gifted speech and language pathologists,” said Dr. Baird. “I have the honor of working with them on a daily basis, in a coordinated and unified fashion.” For the patient, this rich interaction efficiently systematizes the experience, rather than being diagnosed and then having to go somewhere else for speech therapy needs. By having everyone on

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board at the very beginning, the patient can meet the person who is going to do voice therapy with them at the time of the appointment and also schedule a swallow study with that same person. At the UChicago Voice Center, the continuity of care is everlasting, and patients benefit greatly from it.

### Vocal health

Chicago is well-known for its vibrant music scene, as well as its storied contributions to jazz, blues, soul and rock and roll. Having the Voice Center in the heart of the city exposes Dr. Baird to a varied patient population, which he finds substantially fulfilling. “What I love about Chicago is that you have a diverse artistic community. It’s all walks of life. It’s all types of people, which I think is very special,” he said. “What is also very special to me has been the younger generation of musicians and performers. They seem to have a keen understanding of the importance of vocal health, without the same stigma or reluctance to seek out medical care for voice problems they encounter.”

Until recently, singers were reluctant to talk about vocal health. If there was a problem, it was assumed it was a result of poor technique or inappropriate music choices. “Professional singers are vocal athletes,” said Dr. Baird. “They do the same thing that professional athletes do. They are putting their voice and their bodies to the test—they’re really pushing themselves.” While we thoroughly enjoy the vocal acrobatics of phenomenal singers, performing takes a toll. Nurtured vocal health needs to be ubiquitous throughout their careers; it is paramount for longevity.

What’s special about Dr. Baird and his team is that they don’t just make an executive decision or tell singers what they need, they consider it a collaborative effort; there is a mutual responsibility that’s involved with this decision making. “My major recommendation for any singer is, if you’re having any pain when you’re singing, if your voice has changed or if you’re having difficulty with range, you should come in to be evaluated to see what’s going on,” said Dr. Baird. “If you are having a problem, it’s better to identify what’s going on and address it.” Surgery isn’t always the verdict for a voice issue. It might be that voice therapy is needed or that the patient simply needs to improve their nasal hygiene. The only way to know for sure is to get examined.

### Listen to your heart

One small, yet noteworthy, modicum of advice for aspiring laryngeal surgeons from Dr. Baird is to listen, to both your patients and mentors. Your mentors can guide you in what to do and what not to. When it comes to patients, he advises listening to more than just their words. “Listen to your patients, not only to the medical history that they’re presenting to you, but also how they’re saying it. What are the subtleties of what they’re

saying? Listen to the quality of their voice,” said Dr. Baird. “What do they sound like when you talk to them? Do they sound strained? Breathy? Low-pitched?”

Dr. Baird managed to interweave his artistry and musical ear with his desire to care for and help others, a feat that is incredibly admirable. He is a profound and steadfast researcher who is consistently recognizing and cultivating innovative therapeutic options within the field of laryngeal surgery. Moreover, he committedly assesses and explores minimally invasive treatment options that don’t compromise the quality of his patients’ lives.

Talking, swallowing and breathing are three of the most vital aspects of living, and laryngology is at the intersection of them. “Coming to Chicago, I have been so incredibly supported by Nishant Agrawal, MD, Chief of the Section of Otolaryngology—Head & Neck Surgery, and Jeffrey B. Matthews, MD, Chair, Department of Surgery,” said Dr. Baird. “It’s really rewarding to be able to have a patient population that relies on you to help restore a part of their humanity. So much of what makes us human is our ability to communicate, eat and breathe. It’s wonderful to have such a lasting impact on my patients.”



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