

## CATS: OBSERVATIONS AND INSIGHTS

*Throughout my years visiting homes* of all sorts, including every possible circumstance from surprisingly simple and primitive, through ‘ultra-lofty’ living conditions (squalor to absurdly pristine and antiseptic), square-footage (shack or mansion), who lives there, and so on, I have learned that cats can be really important members of any household. They cross all boundaries of every sort. Some are sweet and innocuous, some the opposite. Many seem consistently snooty to everyone in the place no matter who they are. Nonetheless, they are generally willing to take advantage of any setting that has food and comfort. Whatever their surroundings and living situation, this strain of pet cats is not entirely pleased with the way they are treated, but they put up with a great deal because it is the path of least resistance. In short, they usually feel it would be too much trouble to try to find a better situation elsewhere.

Cats go through their day in a series of patterns that are designed to fill the time without discomfort. Sometimes this means a period of playing around with whatever they can find, followed by, if their owners are nearby, a period of allowing themselves to be petted and praised, then partaking in a variety of food (some of which does not meet their standards), and then sleep in the sunbeam by the window. There is a great deal of boredom involved, but they trade this off with not having to make any effort to hunt for food. On the other hand, a few cats actually enjoy going around catching live things that are less strong or quick than them. If this involves being able to go outside to prowl, they enjoy the challenge and the thrill of the hunt. They occasionally eat what they catch, but more often than not, among the cats I encounter, they don’t want to eat that mouse at all, just mess with it, and perhaps present it—in various states of dismemberment—to their owners as a gift (usually the presents are not properly appreciated). The cats I meet are sleek, healthy, well-fed and not in need of anything more. They are extremely lucky, but they don’t really realize it. To them, what they have is an entitlement they deserve.

All too often, when I’ve been sitting on the piano bench for five minutes, I can tell that a cat (or several) live there by the presence of clouds of loose cat hair clinging to my pant legs. This happens even when I have seen no cats at all thus far. Some housekeepers are considerably better at keeping the cat hairs under control. But many houses have given up on hair control, so I have a lot of brushing off to do once I get outside again. Little clusters of hair pool in areas where traffic is light, so space around the pedals and legs of pianos are famous for my accidentally picking up piles of static-laden hair onto my ankles and pant cuffs. This is an occupational hazard that all piano tuners know about.

I have witnessed cats doing all kinds of things around the house. Most of the time I am not present for the throwings-up, but I certainly find the results in odd places on floors near the piano. Also, cat accidents are not all that uncommon, sad to say. Cats are really into sharpening their claws, and often the corners of couches have a certain shredded look to them. One cat, when fed a discount can of cat food in the adjacent kitchen, actually sniffed it, then turned aside and performed the familiar feline gesture with the right front paw of pretending (in this case) to cover up the offending material.

The message to the owner was crystal clear: “This is crap! How could you even *imagine* I would eat this?” Actually, I agreed with the cat. It did not smell at all appetizing.

Some houses are home to both cats and dogs, whom I have observed living in some level of harmony everywhere I go. The whole myth of cats and dogs not getting along does not apply to animals who live together, as all owners of both understand. Sometimes they can be found sleeping in a comfy pile together on the couch, with no feeling of non-trust present among any of them. Of course there are various states and degrees of ‘harmony,’ from constant avoidance, to friendly acceptance. At least they all generally go through their day without bothering to spat. Somewhere in the middle are the majority of cats, who never asked to be placed in the same house with a dog or dogs, and constantly resent it, but manage an equilibrium with them anyway, much like the following dialogue shows. I have imagined this more than once as the cat and dog of the home relate to each other with non-verbal but clear communication.

As the owner is off in another room somewhere, the galumphing old chocolate lab (for example) will tentatively approach the long-haired, regal cat of the house lying on the arm of the sofa. Ralph pokes his nose cautiously at her belly and says, like Mickey Mouse’s friend, Goofy, “Garsh, Josie, I got nothin’ to do. That guy over there is worthless! All he wants to do is mess with that dumb old piano. So. Do ya...wanna...um, *play*, or somethin’?”

“Get away from me, you beast!!!” scolds Josie, showing her distaste with a rapid-fire left-right-left combo on Ralph’s snout with batted paws. “I’ve got enough problems without having to put up with your nonsense! You obnoxious, odious, odorous, awful, disgusting creature....!”

“All right, all right! Jeez! Never mind!” sniffs Ralph, withdrawing.

At least Josie was magnanimous enough not to use her claws. The ironic thing is, should a strange dog suddenly present himself in the room and Josie had nowhere to run, she would have no reluctance whatsoever to cower behind Ralph for protection. Such is the equilibrium of their relationship.

*All dogs and cats*, and other animals too, who live in the same place all know each other pretty much within a couple of days, from my experience. Even in a barnyard of more than a dozen cats and dogs of various ages, each of them has a familiarity (but not necessarily a friendship) with all the others there. If a new dog comes down the road toward them, every one of them instantly knows this is a stranger. Things need to be settled and established before the new one can hope to be there at all, even for a minute. I guess this is an innate instinct in them all to deal with threats to the group. All the petty squabbles among them are temporarily forgotten while the new animal is sized up.

I remember tuning a piano at a house where a dog and two cats lived in a state of disinterest in each other. It seemed that they never bothered to involve themselves in the other’s lives at all. Suddenly the doorbell rang, which made the dog bark and head over to

wherever the doorbell is situated (as described previously in the dog chapter); the cats turned their heads and stayed put. The lady of the house trotted over to answer the door, apparently expecting a visitor. The door burst open and in charged a new dog, with owner in tow. Happy, hi-pitched greetings filled the air from the humans, while the dramatic single challenge-yelp from the resident dog drowned them out. The cats immediately bristled and arched their backs from their chairs. This was an animal who had never been there before. The new guy suddenly looked real nervous, but never made a sound, just kind of shivered beside his owner's legs. It soon was established that this was just a harmless puppy visiting, and the instantly alert 'guard-dog' melted into an inquisitive and curious state of interest, sniffing and investigating, but soon relaxing enough to let the puppy touch noses. The cats, on the other hand, still hated the presence of the interloper and herded themselves behind their dog, then left the room as soon as they could.

*I once visited a home* that featured no dogs, but about three cats who pretty much 'ruled the roost' They draped themselves everywhere languidly, without any concern about whether or not they were interfering with the people who lived there. This sometimes involved parking themselves in high traffic paths like snow plows in the middle of an airplane's landing runway.

This family also owned a couple of tame white rats, who somehow managed to get their owners to let them loose in the house on occasion. The rats were pretty big, but nowhere as big as each of the cats. All the cats seemed to have reached a truce with them, to my surprise. The rats would poke their heads out from behind a couch and the cats would take immediate notice, but after a second of recognition, they'd go back to ignoring the rats.

When I asked the owner about this relationship, she concluded that the cats had accepted them as special status fellow-pet animals, not fair game for chasing, capture, and, God forbid, eating. Gray mice probably did not have any interest in living at that house (and some may have paid the price for being careless), but the white rats were so slow and disinterested in the cats that those felines just went on their way around the place with no concern about them. The cats did not feel any threat from them, and felt no need to chase them away. The rats always surprised *me*, though, and whenever they poked their heads around the corners of things, I was taken aback every time, for the first half hour. After that, I became as inured to them as the cats.

Coincidentally, this was the same home where I noticed (as I was leaving one time) another cat make a yowling and scrabbling noise from outside the porch through the mail slot. This gap in the wood by the outer porch door was missing its metal flap, so it was obvious that a cat was peering through the hole and reaching in with his paw repeatedly. The piano owner and I were lingering on the porch for a moment, saying 'bye,' when this pushy animal let his presence known. When I asked whether this one should be let in, the owner laughed and explained, "Oh, no, he's not ours. He lives next door. But he's always hoping my Roxie will come out and play. He loves to chase her around the yard. He's insatiable."

“I guess it’s nice to be popular in the neighborhood,” I observed. “But that guy seems pretty demanding.”

“Totally. A crass and clueless tomcat—a lot like some college boyfriends I remember,” she chuckled.

*Two striped gray cats lived* in an older house in St. Paul, where they enjoyed the luxury of being the only pets there, other than those within a small fish bowl. The cats were sometimes intrigued by the motion of the small goldfish and neons who lived there, but they never attempted to grab anyone out. This pair of cats turned out to be a mother-daughter team, so they were very familiar with each other. And bored with each other.

On this occasion, I had with me my large tool box to take care of the action repairs this old upright piano needed. Most of the time I only bring inside my small box of tools and supplies that I use for the tuning itself. This big box of stuff (loaded with tons of tiny action parts, supplies, screws, and specialized tools, so as to be ready for anything) is actually an old and capacious tackle box with a very deep lid that folds back onto the carpet when it’s open.

After about fifteen minutes of repair work, I noticed the younger of the two cats climbing into that tackle box lid to hide. As her daughter watched, unseen, the mom cat returned to the room from the kitchen, wandered near and finally beside the tackle box. And there she stopped to lick her paws. The rascal youngster peered slyly over the top of the box lid, and during a minute’s time she devised a devious plan to surprise her mom. It would have been easy to just jump out of the box and yell ‘boo’, but, no, that was not good enough. As the mother cat stared into space, licked her paws and washed her face casually, the hidden cat was watching her from behind with extreme stealth. Ever so slowly and silently she reached her paw out of the box lid and briefly, lightly touched her mom’s tail, and hastily withdrew. The unsuspecting older cat did a remarkable one foot leap straight up followed by an instinctual, defensive ninja twist in mid-air, just like a spring trap that had been sprung. Even relaxed and unsuspecting felines really are high-strung, and their reactions are instantaneous. In one more second, mom had established the source of that pat on her tail. She scolded, “Oh! It’s only you, you nasty brat!” She spontaneously returned to life in the slow lane, ignoring the cat in the box lid and going on with her more important grooming work. It was a good surprise though, with admirable planning.

I really enjoy ingenuity in the actions of animals, wherever I travel.

*An all-black cat who lived* with only humans, always (probably from boredom) took a huge interest in me every time I arrived. He looked for my attention some of the time, but mostly just was really curious about what I was doing to the grand piano he lived with. As I took off the music rack and lifted the grand piano’s lid to reveal the horizontal strings, he was taken with the dampers that bobbed up and down, and the hammers that moved so noisily under the strings—at least, they created sounds he did not expect. The cat was especially interested the red felt strips that I dangled over the edge of the case as I

installed them temporarily amidst the strings; he batted at them with no restraint. He really wanted to find out about every aspect of the piano, and when he came to sit beside me on the piano bench, he reminded me a great deal of small piano students whom I have taught over the years, sitting in that same spot. He reached out a tentative paw, lightly pressed a single white key, and received a satisfying sound in return. "That's right, 'A'. A good place to start," I told him. He may have been exceptionally brilliant, living in the home of a mathematics college professor and a state senator. Or just an ordinary, alert cat who relies on people for fun in his life. He seemed to enjoy the communal camaraderie of sitting casually on the bench with me for at least fifteen minutes. He kept me company sweetly with no disruption to my work.

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