

LIFE'S PURRFECT

Meow Melodies

The different vocal sounds a cat makes can be almost musical.

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN BLESSED WITH cats that sing in the car. But my kitten, Ziggy, outsings every cat I've ever known.

When we took him home from the animal shelter, I put his vocals down to nerves.

Not long after, we had to take him to the veterinarian for his shots. The moment we placed him in his carrier, the singing began.

It started off with a tentative operatic *dolcissimo* (very sweet) "mew," followed by a second and then a third. As we turned the corner, he started scratching on the side of the carrier and the mew got more *espressivo* (with more expression). Then he tried a new tactic, and the mews got *doloroso* (sad and mournful). From his perspective, he probably thought I wasn't listening, so he began to get more *insistent* (insistent) until his vocals turned *fortissimo* (very loud).

On the way home, it was a repeat performance. A few weeks later, we were off to the veterinarian again for follow-up shots. And soon Ziggy was singing the same aria. The next week, when it was time for his rabies shot, we were back in the car, and Ziggy was singing again. What was so interesting was the fact that it sounded like the same song. Cats, in fact, have quite a large vocabulary. Author and naturalist Jean Craighead George, who studied cats in nature and wrote about the language cats have in her award-winning children's book *The Cats of Roxville Station*, says that the different ways in which a cat meows has a special idiosyncratic meaning. She has categorized some feline vocalizations as follows. They are written phonetically to emphasize the different sounds and tones:



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Kittens:

- Mew (high pitched and thin): a polite plea for help
- MEW (loud and frantic): an urgent plea for help

Adult cats:

- Mew: plea for attention
- Meow: emphatic plea for attention
- MEOW: a command
- Mee-o-ow (with falling cadence): protest or whine
- MEE-o-ow (shrill whine): stronger protest
- MYUP (short, sharp, single note): righteous indignation
- MEOW! Meow! (repeated): panicky call for help
- Mier-r-r-ow (chirrup with lilting cadence): friendly greeting

Soon I worked out that Ziggy had composed a feline "song."

Here are his lyrics:

Mew ... mew ...

MEW!!

Meow

MEOW!

Mee-o-ow

MYUP! MYUP!

MEE-o-ow

MEE-o-ow

Second verse same as the first.



So I decided to translate. It goes something like this:

Hello ... Helloow ...

What's happening here?

This isn't fair.

You scooped me out of my favorite chair.

I was asleep.

What did you think — I wouldn't make a peep?

What's happening now?

Meeow miaow!

The vet! Oh no!

I don't want to go!

I'm prodded and given a shot.

It calls for a total boycott.

Take me home ...

NOW!!!

Meow ...



If you listen closely to your cats, you will discover they all know this song — it's as inherent as hunting. Now all I have to do is put it to music, and my composer friend Charles Segal is working on that. 🐾