

What We're Talking About: Pets in the Voice Studio

Sixty-eight percent of U.S. households own a pet, according to the 2017-2018 National Pet Owners Survey (APPA). So it stands to reason that a number of those pets live in homes that double as voice studios. NATS Inter Nos editor Cynthia Vaughn asked some NATS members via email and online forums to talk about the positives and negatives of musical pets.

To deter students with allergies, Denver NATS member **Ellie Seligmann's** website states clearly that there are cats in the studio. Her studio policies also warn parents to supervise children around the pets and a storm door helps prevent cats from accidentally getting out when students come and go. She adds, "Not having cats in the studio during off hours keeps the hair and dander down and I also have an ionic air purifier that I use with students who are allergic to cats. They say it really helps." While some prospective students may stay away, other students love to have cats in the studio while they sing. "I had two students who arrived early to every lesson so they had time to play with the cats before lesson time." Despite cats' reputation as being quite aloof, Ellie tells of a former cat that attended every single lesson. "The one time he missed a lesson, I went looking for him and found him locked in a closet."

Christin Coffee Rondeau recalls "When I taught in New Mexico, we had a cat named Gus—a giant, black-and-white, regal beast. If he didn't like a student's singing, he would howl and try to drown them out. I would always reassure them that he only did that when he was happy, but we all knew the truth." She currently has two cats, and she always informs new students. "Of course, if I have a student who really doesn't like cats, I'll lock the cats upstairs.... but then the yowling and scratching starts, so it's easier to just have them in the studio with us!" Christin has invested in a heavy-duty air purifier for each floor of the house, "because I HATE cat-related odors/dander and assume my students do as well! So that might be an option for teachers with pets who need to teach out of their homes."

With three cats in her home studio **Shannon Coates** has an essential oils diffuser going "pretty much 24-7... My house smells like a spa." She admits that having cats in the studio is a big distraction for her very young singers. "All cats usually have to leave the studio in order for me to effectively teach anyone under nine years of age."



Ellie Selgmann's cat Trisket as a kitten

On the caveat side, **Brian Lee** admits, "I like dogs and cats, but never in a voice studio or rehearsal space. I don't want to hear them or smell them when I go to a coaching or rehearsal. A lot of pet owners are oblivious to the smells. I get very uncomfortable with that, and if my students had to take allergy medicine to study with me, I think their singing would be compromised in their lessons. I've had people say 'Thank God you don't have cats.'" **Justin Petersen** agrees, "I don't have a dog for the exact reason that I have no idea what reactions (allergies) would occur. I have had teachers in the past who had dogs and I was very uncomfortable. One, because of the smell and dander, and two because of the random barking during lessons. I mean, chacun à son goût, but I'd rather not have an animal in the studio—I think it's an added liability. Also, nothing closes a throat faster than an animal allergy, then goodbye to the remainder of the lesson."

Marisa Gray Atha's home studio is home to Pedro the singing Chihuahua. "My students love him. I love him. He's such a great little character to have as part of the studio—12 years young, that little guy! Yes, he yips and yaps when the doorbell rings, but I actually have it written into my studio policies in the "what to expect at your first lesson" section. His bark is loud, but it's all excitement, and he's settled as soon as the door closes and he gets a little hello pat. He has the following rules: since he is a singer at heart, he must be in the family room during warmups—he just can't stop himself from singing along to scales, especially male falsetto and female head voice. Arpeggios and staccato are his favorite and he absolutely must sing his heart out to anything sustained

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above A5. He knows my warmup order, and he always anticipates the free slide we do after the first warmup—and not kidding, he is always pitch perfect for the range we use to slide. My students take his duets as a compliment, and since we can only faintly hear him with my studio door closed, it's always comic relief, not an annoyance. After warmups are finished, he joins us in his little dog bed under the piano, and he happily hangs out during repertoire. Only very occasional does he sing during rep—basically if an



Pedro the singing Chihuahua

operatic soprano is rocking out a high C. Other than that, no peeps out of him. I promised my students that if he could ever sing a perfect scale, I'd take him on the road."

Everyone agreed that official service animals are welcome in their home studios. Brian Lee recalls a blind student whose dog came in and sat at his feet—"a very well-mannered dog." However, Marisa Gray Atha and other teachers "would definitely appreciate a heads-up" if a student is bringing a service dog, so that they can kennel their own pets.

The biggest issue with cats is allergies and odors, while barking is the number one issue with dogs in the home studio. **Cynthia Vaughn's** home studio in Colorado had a separate outside entrance from a side yard, separated from the back yard by a fence. "As students arrived or departed, our Sheltie-mix mutt Max, would bark at every single student. Long-time students would enter the studio and shout "Quiet, Max!" Cynthia says, "I know he was just acting like a dog, but it was embarrassing and distracting. I tried kenneling him in another part of the house, or fencing him on the other side yard, but his watch dog and herding instinct was just too strong. My best solution was to start teaching outside of my home!" **Jessica Fielder's** two border collies are allowed in the house but not in the studio. They are also barkers when students arrive. "I've tried many different training techniques over the years and it's still a problem. Ugh, it makes me crazy." **Michelle Markwart Deveaux** did find a solution for her dog's barking. "We now have a special crate in the closet he goes to bed in during lessons." She predicts, "I will not be getting another animal once our sweet Milo goes to Doggie-Heaven. It's like everything—to each their own! I didn't know what my own was until it was too late. HA!"

As with most things, it comes down to balance, and for many teachers the positives of having a pet in the studio outweighs the negatives. "Overall," says Christin Coffee Rondeau, "Students seem more relaxed and at ease when [pets] are in the room."

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~ Dr. Wendy LeBorgne



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