

Nora, the piano player from New Jersey (2009)

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Nora was a pretty, grey tabby, female cat whose mother was a stray. Born in 2004, Nora ended up in a pet shelter in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, USA until one day, as luck would have it, Betsy Alexander and her husband Burnell Yow! passed by to see who was new at the shelter, as they did from time to time. Noticing Nora playing on her own rather than with the other kittens, Betsy picked her up and the two seemed to hit it off straight away. It was decided they would like to take her home to join their five other cats and so ,when the formalities had been completed, Nora joined the household.

Early days

There were a few 'fireworks' at first, as not all the residents welcomed the newcomer, but eventually things settled down and the others seemed to realise that Nora wanted to be left alone. Betsy is a piano teacher, so Nora (named from Leonora Carrington, a British-born surrealist artist) soon became used to music students coming and going. She loved to climb into their music bags and be carried around, and in turn they liked her, brought friends to see her and posed for photos with her. The music room has two grand pianos side by side; Nora seemed to like especially the sound of the Yamaha, which was quite new, and she enjoyed sitting under it while it was being played. Another favourite pastime was chasing her own reflection on the piano's shiny lid, while a very favourite toy was a yellow feather on the end of a string tied to a plastic wand.



One day, when she was about a year old, Nora seems to have decided to have a go herself at piano playing. She had carefully watched the students as they practised, so she knew what to do; she jumped up on the piano stool and put her paws on the keys, which made a pleasing sound. Betsy and Burnell were amazed. The other cats didn't seem at all interested, apart from **Gabby**, an older cat who used to like walking on the keys. She became jealous, and cat treats were needed in order to keep the peace and stop her from attacking Nora!



Fame

Before long Nora was playing nearly every day, keeping her preference for the Yamaha and playing the other piano only when the Yamaha was in use by someone else. She also seems to have had a distinct preference for the higher register rather than the lower notes. After a time she even played duets with some of the students! Someone suggested it would be a good idea if Burnell made a video of her playing, which could then be posted on YouTube so that all their friends could see her too — it was an instant hit, and that was the start of Nora's fame.

Since then other videos were made — although apparently she didn't like being filmed and the cameras had to be operated remotely — and Nora became something of a celebrity, with fans in many countries. She was featured in TV shows, had various items of merchandise for people to buy — and even received a card from fellow pianist Billy Joel! She has a page on [Facebook](#) (*still in use in late 2025*) and of course her own website, [Nora the Piano Cat](#) (which now features a cartoon Nora). A couple of short videos are on the site (see under 'Media'), but other videos and a couple of delightful slide shows are sadly no longer viewable, as they required the now-defunct Flash player. A DVD of Nora's videos was released. Her popularity continued to grow and millions of people watched her videos — the first, *Practice makes Purr-fect*, had passed 20 million views by early 2011.

Oh, and she found a feline companion, too. A new kitten — named Rennie after René Magritte, another surrealist artist — joined the household and the two became firm friends. Rennie doesn't play the piano, but he does love to climb inside it! (See the video *Nora calls the Piano Tuner*.)



CATcerto

In 2009 Lithuanian conductor Mindaugas Piecaitis heard about the cat and decided to compose an orchestral piece to frame her piano playing. The resulting 4-minute composition, *CATcerto*, premiered at the Klaipeda Concert Hall in Lithuania on 5 June with video of Nora, the 'featured soloist,' playing on a giant screen behind the Klaipeda Chamber Orchestra during the performance. It can be seen at Nora's website, at Piecaitis' [CATcerto](#) pages (where there is more information about the project), or at YouTube. In 2010 the piece was recognised by Guinness World Records as being the earliest piano concerto for a cat.

Award

The Westchester Feline Club of New York state, apart from holding a prestigious annual cat show, has for some years now named its choice of 'Cat of the Year'. The first one so named was [Scarlett](#), for her courage in rescuing her five kittens from a blazing building. From 2009 each Cat of the Year will be awarded a 'Scarlett Ribbon' in memory and honour of Scarlett, who died in 2008.

The first Ribbon and 2009 award were made at the cat show in White Plains, NY, to Nora, the piano-playing feline from Philadelphia, in recognition of her unique feline musical talent. The presentation was made on 21 November to Betsy Alexander, Nora's 'mom', by Karen Wellen, Scarlett's owner and carer. A highlight, after the award had been presented, was to see, via a webcam, Nora sitting at the piano at her home and tickling the ivories.

In September 2023 Nora celebrated her 19th birthday. She wasn't playing the piano often by then, as she was suffering from arthritis.

Sadly, Nora died in early February 2024. She'd been suffering with chronic kidney disease for some years, living a fairly normal life, but her condition worsened and she died 'on her favourite blanket at home, surrounded by her loved ones'. Burnell said, 'We are so grateful to have had nearly 20 years with this beautiful and talented feline. She brought Betsy and I so much joy, and through her we met so many wonderful folks. We loved her dearly ... I can't imagine a world without her.'

[Philadelphia](#)

[Inquirer](#) (Feb. 2024 – archived copy)



[Wikipedia](#) | [YouTube 1](#) | [YouTube 2](#) | [Instagram](#)

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