

*A friend at a club meeting announced that she was now riding with a classical trainer and that the lessons were so different, so much better than from her old instructor. What kinds of differences would she have been referring to?*

I've been mulling over this answer for a while—it's the proverbial minefield to pick your way through. What is Classical? Usually, if you're a professional, it's what *you* put on the sign at the end of your driveway and definitely *not* whatever your neighborhood rivals are teaching. Google up "Classical Dressage" (can I stop capitalizing it now?), and the name at the top of the page is Jane Savoie's. I'm sorry—nice lady, good speaker, successful clinician—not "classical." I could go right down the list, placing each trainer in the "yes" column or the "no" column, but that would further obfuscate the issue. I'd have an easier time if you give me a dozen columns to sort them into.

In some circles classical means "old." But if you go back in the literature far enough, you'll find illustrations of diabolically long-shanked bits and spurs and even the practice of tossing a wild cat onto a horse's croup to help engage his hindquarters. "Old", of itself, isn't a valid measuring stick.

Taking a cue from classical music, we might expect examples of classical riding to contain a common set of characteristics. In music these include incorporating a written literature and notation, a codified instrumentation and form, rigorous technical execution, and complexity. By those standards what they do at the Spanish Riding School of Vienna would certainly qualify. But the plot thickens. In some circles you'd hear "Well, the SRS used to be classical until they sold out to commercialism." Why that reaction? Because somewhere after Steinbrecht, a faction of dressage went off the rails, and the "classical" mantle was hijacked by the followers of Baucher and his successors. While the techniques practiced at the SRS look very familiar to an American competitor's eye, the French school which is built around *lightness*—*légèreté*—looks quite different.

The progression of training—the pyramid—that you're familiar with does not apply. Through *flexions* taught first from the ground and later from under saddle, *submissiveness* [Note: a different connotation than the FEI version] produces *self carriage* [Again, different connotation]. The horse is always kept light in the bridle [Uncharitable Germans might say "disconnected and on intermittent contact."] The horse is taught to shorten his base of support [*engage*] and to *elevate* his forehead. *Impulsion* is added later.

One thing is certain. If you wish to compete, you have to play by the mutually agreed upon rules which in this universe are those established by the FEI and replicated in the main by all the national federations—in our case the USEF. Because the progression in the French school is so different, it doesn't translate well to the goals, purpose, and directive ideas which our judging is built around. Perhaps you'll recognize more convergence at the very highest levels, but along the way, if you ride according to the French principles, you generally won't score very well.

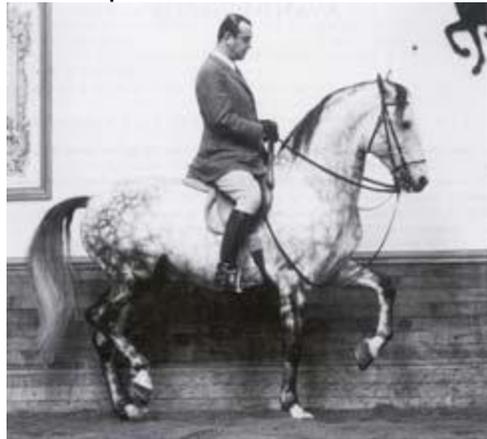
Clearly, these are very large differences, but wait, there's still more! Now I must reveal my bias (big surprise). Just as the Tea Party and the Radlibsocialistdemocrats hurl barbs back and forth based on perceived stereotypes, so do classical and competitive dressage, dressage sportif, or plain old modern, 21<sup>st</sup> Century dressage proponents. The classicists (I'm painting with a broad brush) say things like: "We do

dressage as Art for its own sake. When you compete, your motives are impure; therefore, your riding can never be correct,” or “Sport, by its very nature is frivolous and its product cannot be taken seriously.”

Here’s some more. “Horses in modern dressage are taught to run and are highly agitated. When a horse presents as calm, the comments made are that the horse is not forward. Fear of the whip, the spur or just general agitation is what is presented as forward. This is because a horse who moves with that kind of motion is alert and excited... real forward is different. It comes from a place of absolute calm and relaxation. It is unfortunate that this real calm is not appreciated.”

And from a different writer describing a video clip of Reiner Klimke schooling Ahlerich: “Yes, he’s very good at the German method. Notice that the horse is on a constantly tense rein, and that the overriding quality is very, very precise. I’m not sure I’d say that horse’s relaxed at any point in the video . . . In latin work, the release, relaxation, and self carriage are critical- precision is used to check the relationship but it is secondary, the flow is more important. The rein is lightly looped, the horse goes on weight of the rein, not strength of the arm. In teutonic work the precision is the most important element. German mind/French mind. I’d rather dance with a latin dancer given the choice. Dressage was designed and intended and used, at its inception, to supple body and mind and keep a horse sound-- not to demonstrate precision. But...that’s what I’m interested in-- not the demonstration of the relationship, but the inner quality of the relationship.”

Needless to say, my opinion differs from what I’ve quoted above. There is much beauty in good classical riding. Witness this photo of Portuguese master Nuno Oliveira. But do you really think Ravel is “highly agitated” and running away from Steffen’s legs? Do you really think Klimke is pulling on the reins all the time just because there’s a light contact? And do you think that just because someone enters the show ring, she no longer truly loves her horses but is only using them as a vehicle to massage her own ego? Haven’t these people ever heard of *fun*?



I agree there are lots of examples of bad dressage and unwholesome attitudes in the dressage world we know—riders and trainers who push for too much or who make their horses’ best interests secondary. But I also know many students and colleagues who clearly do *not*!

Meanwhile, the issue of precision is worth a further look. Yes, the nature of “our kind” of dressage includes a major element of precision which does have its roots in the German culture but more so in the traditions of European cavalry. That a Grand Prix test demands 12 to 15 steps of piaffe is arbitrary—precision for its own sake—but that a circle should be round and of a predetermined size or that the haunches shouldn’t lead in a half pass is intrinsic to the nature of training balance and acceptance.

Two more quotes: “. . . the starving artist and the story of the artist who paints, sculpts, plays only for herself remains a powerful ethical hero for us-- where the solo rider, dancing in her arena with her horse is questioned. If you were REAL you’d be

competing, you'd be exhibiting, you'd be scrutinized and judged. Right? Learning to listen to one's artist voice can make painting, drawing, music...and riding even more fulfilling alone, or...more accurately...with an audience of one.”

“I like the artist concept - we are constantly encouraged to be referenced by people outside of ourselves when we should stand in our own power and be self referenced. My goal is be at one with my horse(s) in harmony and to strive to reach that ultimate connection. When I have that what will I care what anyone else says or thinks. As Parelli says – it’s about the relationship which comes first.”

Judge me not lest ye be judged? That’s one way to go through life. On the other hand, without feedback and standards, both aesthetic and ethical, it’s pretty easy for what you’re doing to devolve into any of a number of peculiar alternatives—Vegas? Circus? Or just plain boring or ugly? If it brings you joy to be your own judge, I suppose it doesn’t matter, but even an artist must have critics. Here’s a link to a video where “flow” supersedes “precision.” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfiTTyi2He8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfiTTyi2He8). You decide. You can see how with a less able practitioner, you could end up with a lot of random swirling around.

The classical versus modern arguments will never go away—except I don’t much feel it’s an argument worth having. We aren’t going to stop competing, nor are we going to be dissuaded by some self righteous “artistes” who claim they have a monopoly on the sensitivity to love their horses. But we can examine our methods and attitudes critically. We, too, can remain mindful of our horses’ wellbeing no matter what task we put them to, and we, too, can hold in high esteem the virtues of light aids, of riding *to the hand* in self carriage, and of promoting both the image and the essence of harmony in our daily work.

Beyond this, if you have a Google Machine, I commend to your inspection the writing and videos of Nuno Oliveira, of Egon von Neindorf, Jean Claude Racinet, Philippe Karl, and Thomas Ritter. Some parts are more pleasing than others. Some may be more relevant to you, but all of it is worth knowing about.

*Bill Woods, May 2012*