

Classical Dressage: A Systemic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an application of systems theory to a complex area of human endeavor, Classical Dressage. The area is well represented in a rich literature dating back to the time of Xenophon (c.380BC) and has many practitioners worldwide today. The paper offers a description of Classical Dressage theory and practice presented through a number of systems concepts and illustrated by means of systems tools. The analysis, which is conducted in line with the author's interpretive systems background, illustrates how Classical Dressage can be seen as not only being concerned with the 'correct' training and riding of horses but also about the personal development of the trainer/rider. The paper concludes by presenting a description of the component parts of a 'classical' or 'academic' approach to equitation. Throughout, examples from the classical equitation literature are provided to illustrate the analysis presented.

Keywords: Classical Dressage, Purposeful Human Activity, Relationship-Maintenance, Systemic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Classical dressage is an approach to the training and riding of horses that, according to its advocates, has its origins in the writings of the Greek general Xenophon (c. 380BC) and a practice that may stem back even further into the Hittite civilization (Pereira, 2001). Classical dressage has a rich literature (see Loch, 1990, which contains an excellent reference section detailing many of the key classical dressage authors across the centuries) and is practiced worldwide. However, it has rarely been subject to a critical evaluation from an academic perspective although it has been referred to as 'academic equitation' in the past because of its

advocates' interest in the studied relationship between theory and practice: riders from this tradition have dedicated their lives to trying to understand the biomechanics of the horse and to understand how they can augment the movement and beauty of the horse when ridden. In the past the reasons for this have been varied but today it is usually considered to be an art form by its proponents (e.g. Belasik, 1990, 2009; Loch, 1990; Henriquet, 1991; Oliveira, 1965; Winnet, 1993). This way of thinking has meant there has been some divide between the 'classical' proponents and those who are involved in the modern sport of competitive dressage, where focus appears to be upon the breeding and training of horses capable of executing

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bigger and more exaggerated movements as opposed to ‘correct’ movements (as laid down by the ‘rules’ of the governing body of sporting international dressage, which were developed out of ‘classical principles’). The training methods of some successful international dressage riders have been severely criticized (e.g. Heuschmann, 2006; 2012) since they appear, to some, to not only breach ethical boundaries but also to be practicing equitation that has moved a long way away from the ‘correct’, tried and trusted ‘classical’ methods developed over the last millennium. For this reason the classical approach seems to be enjoying renewed interest at present.

BACKGROUND AND PROCESS

The author of this paper has been a student of Classical Dressage for more than ten years. In trying to follow the advice of many ‘Classical’ commentators who state the importance of combining theory with practice, she has immersed herself in the writings of both old and modern ‘masters’, travels to take instruction from selected trainers, attends clinics and conferences, and attempts to practice the theory in the riding and training of horses. In trying to make sense of the subject as a whole the author turned towards her ‘systems’ training (in a professional capacity she has been involved in studying, teaching and practicing ‘systems’ inquiry for more than twenty years). This paper illustrates her application of systems theory and tools to identify and explore what, for her, are the component parts of this complex activity. The result of this discussion is an outline of what she believes to be the key principles of classical dressage.

As a way of focusing on and structuring the research reported here, the author was the subject of a systems inquiry exercise undertaken using the Appreciative Inquiry Method (AIM) (West, 1995). A technique using a systems map from the early stages of AIM (West & Stansfield, 1999) was used to help the author make explicit her appreciation of the subject, to begin to identify important themes and to offer some

structure for future discussion. The focus for this investigation was the question “How is classical dressage systemic?” The process involved (i) the author’s production of a systems map, (ii) the use of the map to support discussion of the subject and (iii) revisiting and redrawing the map as a result of the discussion. As a result of this exercise her appreciation of the ‘whole’ (which up to this point in time had been largely tacit) emerged from the identification of the ‘parts’. Figure 1 represents a version of the resulting map and illustrates six main areas for discussion (i.e. the six ‘sections’ in the Systems Map). These six areas will provide the key points for discussion in this paper.

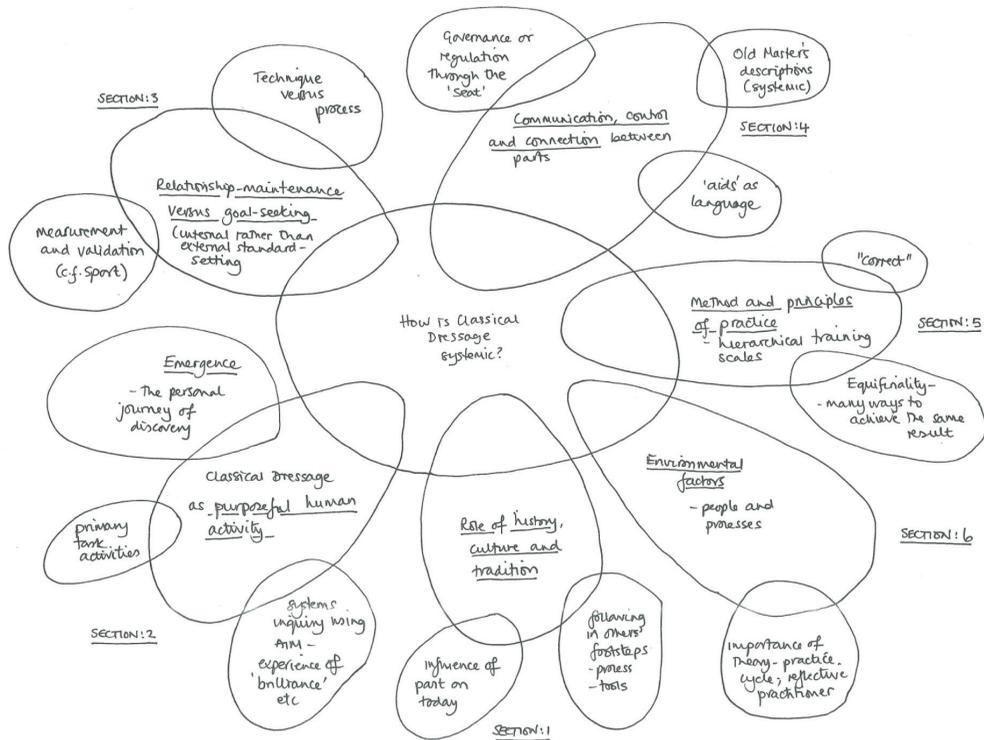
Many quotations from the literature are provided to illustrate and explain the issues discussed in these six sections. The aim is to allow the words of the classical ‘Masters’ and commentators to present their own descriptions of classical dressage: it is hoped that their narratives, with their own language, associated context and examples, will enable the reader to enter into their ‘worlds’. Of course, the selection of these narratives depends purely on the author’s perception, selection and interpretation.

The author is aware of the highly subjective nature of the work presented. It is emphasized that it is not the intention to compare the classical approach with any other approach to dressage or to pick up on current topics in equitation such as the potential contribution of science to our understanding of the human-horse relationship since these things lie outside the scope of this paper. The aim is to offer a systemic analysis of classical dressage.

Systems Map Section 1: The Role of History, Culture, and Tradition

The first component of the map to be discussed is that of the role of history, culture and tradition. This topic is addressed in two parts: the first deals with the way that history and culture has helped to shape the ‘classical dressage’ of today whilst the second part considers how tradition and the lessons from the past influence and direct the classical trainer and rider.

Figure 1. A systems map to illustrate the author's appreciation of the systemic nature of classical dressage



The Role of History and Culture

Classical dressage has a long and colourful history. The form we see today has evolved out of an interesting mix of historical, geographical and cultural influences. Early use of the horse in war in Europe demanded heavy weight-carrying animals but as warfare developed and the benefits of the maneuverability of the smaller horses native to some regions became clear the training of the horses for their ability to produce power in straight lines changed. The new war vehicle still needed to be strong and courageous but also easily controlled and quick to react. In addition to being merely a vehicle it could be trained to offer offensive and defensive battle movements and, some suggest, we see the legacy of such movements in the high school 'airs above the ground' practised

today by, for example, the Spanish Riding School and the Cadre Noir (bayareabert, 2009; Husky005reloaded, 2010) both of which have military origins. In southern Europe, using the horse as a working farm animal also required certain physical and mental characteristics of the horse and we can see this style of 'working' riding continued today in the Camargue, the Iberian peninsula (e.g. Ianchonman, 2006), north and south America on ranches and in the sport of Doma Vaqueira/Working Equitation (e.g. Arenalilla, 2007; HorseOsteopath, 2010). Linked to this working style of riding comes the development of the use of the horse in bull fighting where the bravery, skill and athleticism of the horse is tested to the full (e.g. Rpgdressage, 2012). Moving away from practical utility we come to the use of the horse for 'display'. In the Middle Ages, when not used in battle,

valuable, highly trained horses were kept and used in displays such as jousts and tournaments (e.g. Duarte, 1438). Later, the education of any young nobleman included horsemanship and schools, or academies, that explored, developed and taught this skill flourished all over Europe from the 16th to the 19th century (e.g. see Loch (1990) for a full discussion of these establishments and their teachers). Innovative horsemen from these schools provide us with much of the writing we have on ‘academic’ equitation – the work of the ‘old masters’ (e.g. Grisone, 1558; de Pluvinel, 1626; de la Guérinière, 1733; Kerbrech, 1891). The Grand Écuyer or Master of the Horse was one of the most highly regarded positions at court and the careers of horsemen and their schools were made by royal or noble patronage and were often linked to the military academies (e.g. Bourgelet, 1754; Pembroke, 1773). Later on, the display of the skills of the teachers and students in these schools to the public in the ‘circus’ (e.g. Baucher (1919), Fillis (1911), Steinbrecht (1885) in the late 19th/early 20th century and, more recently, Nuno Oliveira (Albert Orriols Marsán, 2012)) continued the tradition of ‘display’. Four military academies remain today: the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, the Escola Portuguesa d’Arte Equestre in Lisbon, Le Cadre Noir de Saumur, and the Real Escuela Andaluza de Arte Ecuestre in Jerez, (e.g. Laurieux & Henry, 2009) and continue the tradition of display. At the beginning of the 20th century, military riders, trained out of various European schools, were the successful participants at the first Olympic ‘Dressage’ competitions (the first ‘military tests’ were included in the 1912 Stockholm games). Today, the guardians of the heritage of the highly schooled horse for display (or ‘art’) teach and preserve the centuries old traditions (e.g. elainevalente, 2010). A full discussion of the history of Classical Riding can be found in Loch (1990) but the key influences are illustrated in Figure 2.

An additional but important influence on the development of the classical tradition is the popularity over the centuries of a particular breed of horse, the Iberian/Barb, with their unique physical characteristics and tempera-

ment that make them eminently suitable for the work required (see Loch 1986 for a detailed discussion of the history of the Iberian horse). An example of the high status, desirability and value of these horses can be found in the published letters of the Earl of Pembroke (one of our classical riding practitioners and commentators from the 18th century), who, writing to his son making a Grand Tour of several years, constantly questions him about the purchase, health and travel arrangements of an expensive Iberian/Barb horse, the Aley Bey, he had sourced in Italy. He tells us that bringing the horse back to England “cost £81.16.0” (Herbert, 1939, p326).

The Importance of Tradition

Anyone studying the classical dressage literature is likely to gain a clear sense of belonging to a long tradition of exploration and learning about the training and riding of horses.

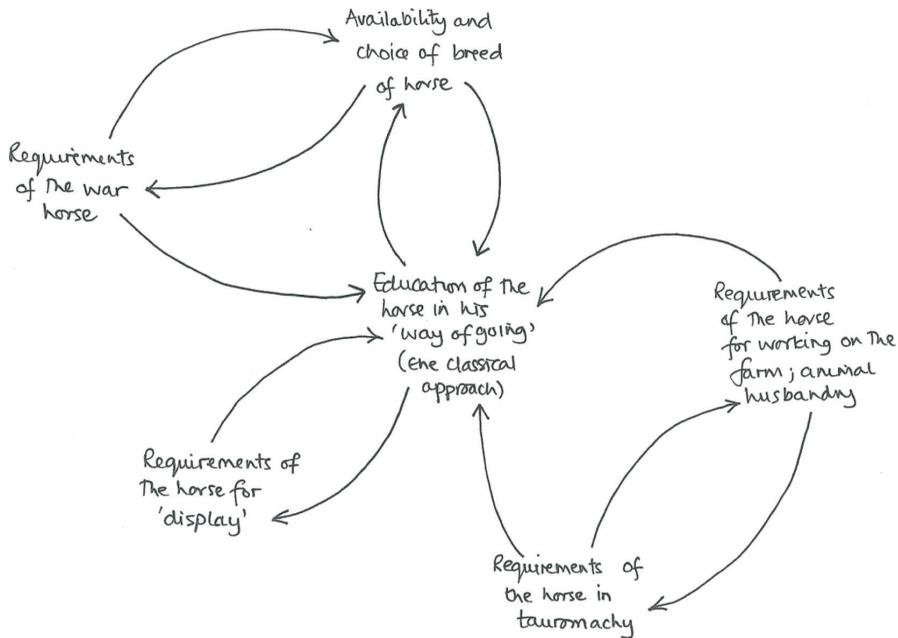
As de Kunffy (1993) explains:

Horsemanship is an ancient art. Its body of knowledge is pragmatic and time tested; it cannot be re-invented. No one can relive the experience of millions of people who rode for millions of hours with millions of thoughts and feelings about it all. Those experiences have been sifted and synthesized for us, into accumulated knowledge that ought to be acquired by aspiring practitioners. All art remains only as good as those who practice it. (p19).

For this reason classical dressage does not belong to any modern rider/trainer – there are no ‘new’, innovative approaches but long-time, tried-and-tested methods. As one learns more one takes on the responsibility of protecting the understanding and lessons of the past; one becomes a ‘keeper’ or ‘guardian’ of the body of knowledge and part of that on-going tradition.

The classical rider does not invent new methods for self promotion but protects and, if extraordinary in terms of skill, may contribute to the existing understanding of the art:

Figure 2. Multiple-cause diagram showing the influences leading to the training of the horse in the 'classical' tradition



Instead, great masters learned all that the past offered and went on to build on it and perhaps to humbly add to it. Their contribution was civilized, because it was in the context of an artistic tradition, rather than a barbaric reinvention of that which already had its own history. (de Kunffy, 1993, p38).

The sense of belonging to this long tradition is strong for the classical practitioner. In a recorded interview Belasik offers a personal recognition and reflection on the role of history and the consequent responsibility that following the classical tradition places on the serious practitioner.

His comment suggests far more than just a physical connection with the past:

I think there's also another element, and that's ...the spiritual element and this is, to me, the most significant element. When you pick up the

equipment...the longe line and the whip, you are picking up pieces of equipment that have changed hardly at all since historical times. You are almost picking up the same equipment that ... the Duke of Newcastle picked up, de la Guérinière, de Pluvinel. When you pick up this equipment and when you begin to use this equipment I think it's important that you recognize the tradition that comes down to you, and that you use this equipment with a sense of reverence to the process, a reverence to the horse...

His recognition that being part of this tradition "...takes you out of yourself and makes you part of something that is much larger." (Belasik, 1993, side B, 1.38-4.24) seems to be an important part of the classical approach: it is a place where there is no room for the ego, a point which takes us nicely on to the second element of the systems map.

Systems Map Section 2: Classical Dressage as Purposeful Human Activity

From the description in the section above we see that in the past there were various reasons for engaging in a considered approach to the training and riding horses: there was a need. Practice of developed horsemanship skills and the need to maintain expensive horses led to the display of the art form. Today, apart from tauromachy, the riders and trainers of classical dressage tend to practice the art, often privately, for the sake of the art itself. In this section the purpose of classical dressage as art and as practiced today is explored. First we look at the primary task of training the horse according to the classical approach, then look a little more closely at the reason why people engage in the activity and, finally, consider what appears to be an important emergent property of this purposeful human activity.

Classical Dressage: The Primary Task

There are many descriptions of Classical Dressage in the literature and common themes focus on the relationship between horse and rider with the ideals of attaining harmony, brilliance, and an augmentation of the horse's natural beauty and movement under its rider.

An underlying provision is that all training should be without force and commentators refer back to the argument of Xenophon (c.380BC), perhaps the earliest recorded Classical horseman, who explained that:

For what the horse does under compulsion, as Simon also observes, is done without understanding; and there is no beauty in it either; any more than if one should whip and spur a dancer. There would be a great deal more ungracefulness than beauty in either a horse or a man that was so treated. No, he should show off all his finest and most brilliant performances willingly and at a mere sign. (Xenophon, p62-3).

Whilst Classical Dressage has a clearly recognizable 'face' to those following and engaging in it, it is not easy to find a clear description of its fundamental parts without resorting to examples, by trying to explain fairly subjective concepts or aligning oneself to a particular proponent or 'school', which frequently results in conflict between members or proponents when they meet (often in print, blogs, discussion boards, etc.). A good example of an informed debate which recognizes the difference in interpretation of the classical approach can be found in a lively discussion between Christoph Hess and Philippe Karl (Classical versus Classique, 2007). In this way, for example, we might be able to recognize a French 'school' (e.g. Oliveira, 1965; de Braganca, 1975; Henriquet, 1991; Karl, 2008; Racinet, 2009), or a German 'school' (Steinbrecht, 1885; Meusler, 1937; Seunig, 1961; von Neindorff, 2005;) and influences that seem to arise from practical issues such as the involvement in competitive dressage and the demands of particular horse breeds. The four European National institutions - the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, the Escola Portuguesa d'Arte Equestre in Lisbon, Le Cadre Noir de Saumur, and the Real Escuela Andaluza de Arte Ecuestre in Jerez, Spain, (e.g. Laurioux & Henry, 2009) claim to uphold the principles of Classical Dressage but financial pressures are potentially changing and threatening the existence (and purity) of these institutions (e.g. http://austriantimes.at/news/Business/2008-01-11/2611/Financial_problems_plague_Spanish_Riding_School, 2008).

It is not unusual to consider the writings of two classical horsemen, William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle ("La Methode Nouvelle et Invention Extraordinaire de Dresser Les Chevaux" originally published in French in 1658 and in its new form in English in 1743) and François Robichon de la Guérinière ("École de Cavalerie" published in 1733), as the foundations of Classical Dressage (most particularly for their experiments in the training of the horse so as to achieve the 'lightness' and maneuverability of the horse so desired by the enlightened rider). Indeed, the Spanish

Riding School (SRS) have always maintained that they implement the training, methods and philosophy of de la Guérinière and so are seen as a direct descendant of the teachings of this great Classical ‘Master’. They also explain that the SRS “is not only the oldest riding academy in the world, it is also the only one where the High School of Classical Horsemanship has been cherished and maintained for over 430 years.” (<http://www.srs.at/en/tradition/the-spanish-riding-school/>, no date).

Loch (1990) offers a number of definitions of Classical Dressage from the literature, illustrating the different emphases and interests, and concludes with a clear if somewhat general description:

Taking all this into consideration, we may now define the Art of Classical Riding as the ability to teach the horse through the use of kindness, logic and exercises based on nature’s laws of balance and harmony, to submit himself happily and proudly to the will of the rider without in any way upsetting his natural way of moving (p18).

However, whilst this definition tells us what classical dressage is about, it does not really tell us why so many people are motivated to engage in this activity. By comparison, competitive dressage has a clear end result – a measurement of success demonstrated by the award of ‘marks’, rosettes, and prestige. So what is the purpose of classical dressage today?

Classical Dressage: Reasons for Its Continued Practice

In an attempt to understand classical dressage as a purposeful human activity system, the author is involved in a long-term systems study using the Appreciative Inquiry Method (AIM) to explore the reasons why different recognized classical riders and trainers continue to practice the classical approach. AIM (West, 1995) draws heavily upon Vickers’ concept of ‘appreciation’ (Vickers, 1965) and the systems modeling tools from Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1981). The results from this study to date are

interesting and demonstrate a range of different purposes. To illustrate this point, two descriptions are shown here. They are both provided in the form of a Root Definition that was produced by the rider/trainer and the author in collaboration. The Root Definitions presented here are the result of several iterations of questioning and reflection. The first definition belongs to a Portuguese classical rider/trainer who comes from a family with a long classical equestrian heritage. He breeds Iberian horses and teaches horses and riders at his small farm in Portugal. He has been taught and influenced by riders/trainers from the French school of classical dressage and from Portuguese bullfighting (a full description of this particular study can be found in West and de Bragança (2012).

His explanation of what classical dressage is for him is as follows:

A rider owned, instigated and directed system for the purpose of experiencing brilliance by bringing about perfect connections in the horse-rider circular relationship through the practice of classical dressage. The experience of ‘brilliance’ and attainment of harmony brings about enjoyment to the rider to the extent that the result is like a special, personal secret between two parties. The outcome of the system is sought within the context of the current possible philosophy of the rider and the character and potential resistances on the part of both horse and rider. The system’s activities must not in any way destroy the horse’s natural movements.

The second example is from a Danish rider and trainer of both horses and riders. He competes in dressage at an international level and he has been taught and influenced by riders/trainers from the German school of classical dressage (West, 2012).

His explanation of what classical dressage means for him is as follows:

A team-owned and manned system to produce a healthy horse in such a way that its needs are met so that it can enjoy a good quality of life in

whatever activity it is involved in with its rider. This activity will then be enjoyable for the rider. This process is constrained by the rider's mind.

These two examples appear to represent two very different personal reasons for engaging in the classical approach. The second description focuses very much on the production of the horse for the purpose of the rider and has more of a 'production' feel to it, whereas the first description is very much about the motivation to explore the magical, personal relationship between rider/trainer and horse. However, despite these differences, there is a clear common theme: the mind, attitude, and character of the rider.

The Rider's Journey: An Emergent Property?

A close inspection of the literature suggests that the role of the rider's mind may be a fundamental aspect of the classical approach which helps to differentiate between it and other approaches to equestrianism.

For example, de Kunffy (1993) offers a clear description of the role of one's self in classical riding and explains:

The life of an equestrian involves one's personal inner life and values, and one's ethics and character traits. There is no question that horsemanship is a science of many branches (p18)

This idea of the training of the self goes back a long way. For example, King Duarte of Portugal, writing in the fifteenth century explained how horsemanship was a singular skill through which one could learn skills for life: to master one's fear, anger, frustration, and the ego and to develop judgment, tranquility, and wisdom (Duarte, 1438).

He explains the relationship between riding and life itself:

... and the riders who have the same objective – to stay erect and firm on the beast – are able

to do everything much better than the others; and practicing these principles, they would acquire the experience they need to succeed in everything they do. (p40).

Several centuries later de Pluvinel (chief écuyer to Louis XIII) argued that horsemanship offered something more than other arts and sciences since its consideration did not take place in the quiet of the study but in constant movement:

Thus Your Majesty can see quite clearly how useful this beautiful exercise [horsemanship] is to the mind, since it instructs and accustoms it to perform with clarity and order all these functions [scientific knowledge, generosity of spirit, soundness of judgment] amid noise, worry, agitation, and the fear of constant danger... (de Pluvinel, 1626, px).

This idea is just as familiar to modern classical 'masters'. For example, Podhajsky (1967), dressage Olympic medalist and one time Director of the Spanish Riding School explains:

Equestrian art, perhaps more than any other, is closely related to the wisdom of life. Many of the same principles may be applied as a line of conduct to follow. The horse teaches us self-control, constancy, and the ability to understand what goes on in the mind and the feelings of another creature, qualities that are important throughout our lives. (p20).

Loch also explains how the classical approach requires a significant shift in the way we might think about the horse-rider relationship. She suggests:

Once the student can shrug off any idea of the horse as a vehicle for their own sport and achievement and begin, instead, to regard the horse as an intelligent living creature with his own needs and place in the scheme of things, perception will grow. As the horse is as super-sensitive and uncomplicated in his mental make-

up as, indeed, we are ourselves, to understand him better will require very real and consistent development of our own mental faculties and powers. Indeed, when this mental aspect is lacking, the physical will suffer. (1997, p9).

De Kunffy (1993) suggests that equestrianism can be considered usefully as an apprenticeship; the education in its arts “should address the entire person, and thus develop the equestrian as a personality” (p41). He argues:

Beyond the necessary physical skills, which constitute the sport in riding, we need to address the rider's mind, that is, the science of riding, and the rider's spirit. (de Kunffy, 1993, p1).

And finally, Henriquet suggests that the classical approach represents an example of the difference between training and education, the latter being a far more satisfying approach:

Equestrian art is distinguished from the usual current riding practice in that it educates, rather than merely trains. That is to say, it opens out the horizons of both horse and rider, rather than passing them along a production line. In this respect, it justifies itself as 'art' in a way similar to music and dance, which do not have rigid structures or boundaries. Furthermore, as with other art forms, it is self-fulfilling: the essence of equestrian art is that it is art. The sensation, for the rider, and the sight, for the onlooker, are complete in themselves. (Henriquet, 1991, p1)

Taking all the above comments into consideration we might be able to recognise an important emerging property of the classical form of equestrianism. The primary task of classical equitation (as discussed above) might be to teach the horse to move under saddle as if at liberty using a kind, logical, natural and ethical approach. However, the reason for this activity would appear to be greater than the mere training of the horse. It is also about the personal development of the rider, the individual journey of discovery that the dedicated rider

finds themselves travelling. The experience of brilliance, the virtue and the nobility that the schooled horse shares with his rider are undoubtedly strong motivating factors to encourage the classical rider on this journey.

Systems Map Section 3: The Measurement of Success - Relationship Maintenance vs. Goal Seeking

The measurement and validation of success in classical dressage is an interesting issue. Given the discussion of the personal and subjective nature of the subject presented above it is easy to see how objective measurement might not be appropriate for classical dressage. This point has particular significance when comparing competitive and classical dressage and helps to explain one area of tension between the two endeavors. A way of illustrating the different position of competitive and classical dressage is to consider the difference between what Vickers referred to as goal-seeking and relationship-maintaining. Vickers put forward the concept of an appreciative system as a way of explaining how we might consider the way in which individuals, or groups, make decisions about how to act.

He explains that the appreciative system (or in this particular discussion, appreciative ‘field’) relates to:

...the inner coherence of that system of interests, expectations and standards of judgement which orders our lives, guiding action, mediating communication and making experience meaningful (Vickers, 1972, p155).

He offered the concept of relationship-maintenance as a way of describing the type of regulation that such a collection of parts relies upon. Vickers considered the all pervasive concept of goal-seeking as being somewhat poverty stricken when used as a model to underpin human decision-making and action, but the maintaining of suitable and desirable relationships between the parts of the whole was

a far more appropriate way to help us consider the management of complex human activity systems (Vickers, 1965). The discussion of the relevance of relationship-maintenance to classical dressage will be presented in two parts; the first dealing with the relationship between technique and process and the second with the measurement of success or the validation of process.

Technique and Process: Ends and Means

The training techniques of classical dressage (as we shall see below when discussing system map element 5), are clearly identified. Many exercises, movements and ‘scales’ of practice are documented and explained: there is order and method in their arrangement. However, the application of the techniques in themselves do not constitute or guarantee either good practice or an output that is excellent. Belasik offers us an insightful example of the relative importance of technique and process. He explains how, in search of dressage excellence, he focused on perfecting his technique according to the ‘rules’ and practice laid down in the literature and taught by trainers he studied with.

Some years down the line he realized that technique, although fundamental, is not sufficient on its own: riding as an art is stifled by imposing the order of technique. He begins to view the role of technique in a different way:

I begin to see technique as only a tool, a discipline to help you remain stable when facing the unconscious, the creative, the fear of the unknown, and the new. I found some breathing room to allow myself to experiment, to experience without constant stifling comparison and measurement. I was beginning to gain a certain confidence in my work. (Belasik, 1990, p88).

In this way he shows us how he begins to understand the importance of living the process rather than aiming constantly for the goal of perfection. This way of thinking is entirely consistent with the idea of a personal journey

discussed above. De Kunffy pulls together the two ideas of ‘process’ and ‘journey’ when he explains:

A process knows no end, has no terminus and is never finished by arrival. Once the process ‘arrives’, it is eliminated. There is no joy in deadline. The desire to be something is ego-oriented and useless to the horse. Strive to do something instead! Do not seek arrival but enjoy the process of getting there. (de Kunffy, 1993, p7).

The link to Vickers’ concept of relationship-maintenance is clear – in classical dressage there is no sensible end point, there is no once-and-for-all goal since perfection is unattainable. The thrill and challenge is to manage the ‘now’ – the ‘dynamic and ever changing situation’: the rider’s skill and understanding, the horse’s strength and ability to perform the exercises. The rider must be judicious, making decisions in an instant about what to request, what to enforce and what to allow. Classical dressage is the continuous management of a complex set of activities and perceptions according to the classical ideals of harmony, equilibrium and lightness.

Measurement and Validation: External vs. Internal

Measurement is an underlying principle of dressage as competition which is very much goal driven. Tests are set to assess the performance demonstrated and to award rosettes and ‘points’ to those receiving the highest scores. Points accumulate over time and denote the level at which the horse is capable of performing. The tests themselves comprise a list of consecutive movements which are scored from 1 to 10. There are marks for ‘collectives’ (such as the overall obedience, suppleness, and compliance of the horse and the skill of the rider) but as these are considered at the end of the test it is likely that they become a judgment on the sum of the parts. The idea that those scoring the highest marks in competition are the best

riders has been strongly argued against by De Kunffy (1993) who states:

The idea now spreading that successful competition on any level, local or international, should determine the ranking of riders is dangerous and faulty. (p27).

Such validation of the training process as judged by competition would seem to focus on output alone. This is in direct opposition to the classical principle that states that the 'end does not justify the means'. We have seen above how at the centre of classical dressage is the development of not only the horse according to certain ethical and biomechanical principles, but also of the rider. Focus on output is detrimental to the focus placed on the importance of process; it does not value the experience of brilliance, or of being 'at one' with the horse. Unsurprisingly, many classical riders avoid competition since the concept of external measurement to judge success makes little sense given the philosophy of their practice. Interestingly, in classical dressage, the measurement that is valued, the reference level, seems to be largely generated from within, especially because so much of classical riding is about 'feel' and, consequently, only the rider is in a position to experience this. This internal development of standards, or a reference level, is consistent with Vickers' view of this process in relationship-maintenance (West, 2005, p273).

Mairinger (1983) helps to explain the responsibility of the rider to develop this 'feel' and to be able to judge personal success:

When you ride a horse do you really prepare yourself? Do you know exactly what you should know? Do you think about it? I will do my best to explain what you should do, how you should do it, and why you should do it. But I will not be able to tell you how the different movements will feel when you carry them out, and that is of the greatest importance – feeling when you are right and when you are wrong, feeling when the horse is moving properly, when his rhythm

is right and his impulsion is right. No book can explain this satisfactorily. (p16).

And we might add, no judging onlooker may be in a position to understand what is being achieved exactly. Obviously, 'feel' needs to be educated. Throughout the literature we are told that measurements that are worthy of the classical rider involve asking questions about whether the rider is considered to be 'just', 'graceful', and able to demonstrate appropriate 'judgment'. It seems difficult if not impossible to equate numbers with such concepts sensibly.

The need for judges in competitive dressage to reduce the assessment of a horse's training to the assessment of a series of movements encourages a lack of systemic judgment; the appreciation of the whole (the harmony between horse and rider) are not of prime interest.

Belasik picks up on this point, although he is referring to the process where trainers concentrate on the parts (ie movements and exercises) and forget the whole (interestingly, many judges are also trainers):

I think this points to a paradox that the western mind does not like to entertain: namely, that observations about riding and riding are two very distinct and separate worlds. Although we need to use words to learn and to teach, they still are very limited. Breaking up the dynamic movements of riding a horse into 'successive entities' in order to talk about it is very artificial. The flow of riding is too continuous to keep stopping it, chopping it up with analysis of particular movements separated from the whole. (Belasik, 1990, p108-9)

A final point, to differentiate between the process encouraged by competition and the process undertaken by the classical rider, is that whilst the latter breaks down their training into the parts of the 'movements', these 'movements' are practiced as a way of strengthening, straightening, and lightening the horse in the journey towards 'brilliance'. These 'movements' used in careful combination to fit the training re-

quirements of the horse are the means to the end. ‘Movements’ in competition, on the other hand, can be seen as encouraging the execution of these movements for their own sake (i.e. to demonstrate competence in these movements).

Systems Map Section 4: Communication, Control, and the Connection between the Parts

In the horse rider relationship, the rider teaches the horse to respond according to given signals. The classical tradition prides itself on these signals being as gentle and discrete as possible so as to be unseen by the spectator (e.g. Loch, 2003). These signals, or language are dependent upon the rider being able to sit so as to move with the horse with as little disruption as possible so that the horse’s movement is undisturbed. A quiet, balanced, tactful rider is able to ‘whisper’ the aids. To achieve this involves the management of a complex whole – the horse and rider in motion. Interestingly, while the horse’s movement influences the rider’s movement, so too the rider’s movement influences that of the horse: a classic example of positive feedback. To discuss communication and connection between the parts in more detail this section is divided into 3 parts. The first deals with the mechanism by which the rider/trainer communicates with the horse by means of ‘aids’, the second focuses on the importance of the rider’s ‘seat’ as the major ‘control mechanism’ and the means by which the communication is directed and the third part explains how, when the communication and control are appropriate, the horse and rider work in harmony, as a single entity.

Communication through a Complex Set of Signals: The ‘Aids’

The way in which the rider/trainer communicates with the horse is through what are referred to as the ‘aids’. Aids are the signals or instructions given by the rider to the horse using the hands, seat, legs, voice, spurs, and whip. Many equitation texts provide a thorough description of the aids, their use and their subtleties but they

are often presented to the reader as a collection of individual movements or signals. However, in the classical tradition they can be seen as a complex set of signals that are used in combination, in greater sophistication as both the level of the schooling of the horse and the experience of the rider progress. Indeed, Stevens (1994) refers to the use of such signals as “an aiding system” [his emphasis] (p24). A useful way of thinking of the aids is as language which is established by the rider in consideration of the horse’s natural inclinations in response to stimulus.

Mairinger (1983) explains the importance of the interplay between aids:

We should not really talk about the aids with your weight, legs, and hands because they don’t exist separately – only by co-ordination of all three together. You cannot use only one. The use of seat, legs and hands can be passive or active. It is like a three-piece orchestra playing a waltz, rock-and-roll, and a Russian lullaby. All must be in tune, in the same time – then it is pleasant to listen to and pleasant to see. Your aids have to be tuned together. You can do it if you really learn body control. (p8).

The Rider’s ‘Seat’ as Governor: Control of the Parts and Their Relationship to Each Other

Fundamental to the rider’s ability to communicate with the horse via the aids is the need for what is called a good ‘seat’ – one that is quiet and in balance with the horse in motion. Quietness in motion is necessary if the communication of the aids, the language, is to be clear. The rider’s seat (usually considered to begin at the rider’s shoulders and end at the knee) is the subject of much debate, and lies at the heart of the classical approach such is its importance for the clear and steady communication of the aids (for a full discussion of this topic see Loch, 1988).

An early recognition of the central importance and systemic nature of the ‘seat’ is given by Bourgelet, writing in 1754:

I have no other Design in this Chapter, than to give an Idea of the correspondence that there is between all the Parts of the Body, because it is only by a just Knowledge of this mutual Relation of all the different Parts, that we can be enabled to prescribe Rules for giving that true and natural Seat, which is not only the Principle of Justness, but likewise the Foundation of all Grace in the Horseman. (p9)

We can see from this quote that the seat is the mechanism from which the desired characteristics of the classical approach derive. It controls, balances, energises and forms the movement of the horse. The other aids, such as those given by hands and legs supplement and complement the seat. To give an example of the power of the seat we can give an example provided by Mairinger. As a young rider in Vienna, Mairinger had difficulty controlling one of the stallions he was exercising outside. A train went past and the stallion bolted in fear. The Old Instructor, whose stallion it was, yelled at the young rider telling him “You are holding him too much.” Mairinger reports he was “holding on for dear life”. The next day the same thing happened.

The Old Instructor demonstrated the control of the ‘seat’:

The Old Instructor said, ‘Here, stay here, check him’. He mounted up and you could really see that weight sink into that saddle. The stallion was bouncing on the spot, his nostrils flaring, and looked about to explode at any minute. To rub it in the Old Instructor said, ‘I told you. You held him too much’. He threw the reins away and the stallion could not do a thing. He couldn’t do a thing because he had to balance himself under that weight. (Mairinger, 1983, p45)

The classical rider/trainer soon begins to understand how discretion and judgment is required if the power of the seat is not to be exploited to the detriment of the horse where ‘control’ and ‘governance’ become brute force and domination (Belasik, 2001, p48).

The idea of the seat being a complex interplay between parts of the rider’s body is explained further by Bourgelet, who instructs on the importance of the connectivity of the parts of the rider’s body and explains how small movements in a part may change the whole.

For example, in what must be one of the earliest ‘systems’ descriptions he explains how a necessary but difficult position (a good seat) may be achieved easily by the rider if he understands how the parts fit together and function as a whole:

The Horseman should present or advance his Breast, by this his whole Figure opens and displays itself. He should have a small Hollow in his Loins, and should push his Waist forward to the Pommel of the Saddle, because this Position corresponds and unites him to all the Motions of the Horse. Now, only throwing the Shoulders back produces all these Effects, and gives them exactly in the Degree that is requisite, whereas, if we were to look for the particular Position of each Part separately, and by itself, without examining the Connection that there is between the Motions of one Part with those of another, there would be such a Bending in the Loins, that the Horseman would be, if I may so say, hollow-back’d; and as from that he would force his Breast forward, and his Waist towards the Pommel of the Saddle, he would be flung back, and must sit upon the Rump of the Horse. (Bourgelet, 1754, p7)

For the classical rider the seat is the mechanism by which the rider channels and manages the power of the moving horse; it can be seen as regulating the relationships between the parts and, as such, is responsible for governance in the Vickerian sense (Vickers, 1965, p31-34).

Communication and Control to Achieve Harmony: The Horse and Rider as One

When a high degree of communication between rider and horse is achieved then the harmony, balance and lightness so desired by the classical

rider may be experienced. Henriquet, (1991) explains:

Equestrian art requires that the two participants, a horse and rider, fuse into one entity. This fusion becomes wonderful when it is so complete that physical communication between two creatures seems replaced by the harmonious movement of [a] single being. (p1).

This description not only explains the whole that emerges from complete communication but also illustrates the way in which the brilliance sought by the Portuguese rider/trainer, as described above, might be achieved. Whilst we might recognize this output of the experience of ‘brilliance’ as being of a spiritual nature there is also a practical output of complete communication and control, namely ‘collection’. Collection can be considered to be the greatest proof of a well schooled horse: it is the culmination of long training and demands a supple, powerful and obedient horse. True collection allows ‘lightness’ and elegance, and represents schooling to the highest level. In his essay on ‘collection’ Belasik (2009) tries to explain how at lower levels of schooling the rider works the horse from outside the ‘system’ in that they influence the horse’s way of going from outside. However, collection has a very particular effect on the horse/rider relationship:

As a horse collects a curious phenomenon begins to occur. The horse becomes more manoeuvrable but is less stable. In the levade, the horse is quite beautifully balanced but quite unstable – easy to affect, easy to upset with either good or bad riding. The rider’s influences and forces change from external suggestions outside the system of the horse to internal forces within the new system of horse and rider. The rider and horse become one system; one body. The clichés about becoming one with your horse actually have physical merit as you enter into the world of collection. (Belasik, 2009, p56)

Systems Map Section 5: Principles of Practice and Equifinality

The method by which a horse is schooled according to the classical tradition is well documented in the literature (e.g. d’Endrody, 1959; Seunig, 1961; Karl, 2008; Kottas-Heldenberg, 2010). In this section we look first at the popular idea of a scale of training which attempts to offer a clear step-by-step process for the development of a well-schooled horse. In the second section we consider how the setting out and determination of the ‘method’ by which classical training can be applied leads to conflict of interpretation and the need to understand that classical ‘principles’ need to be just that – guiding principles.

Establishment of Method: The Training Scales

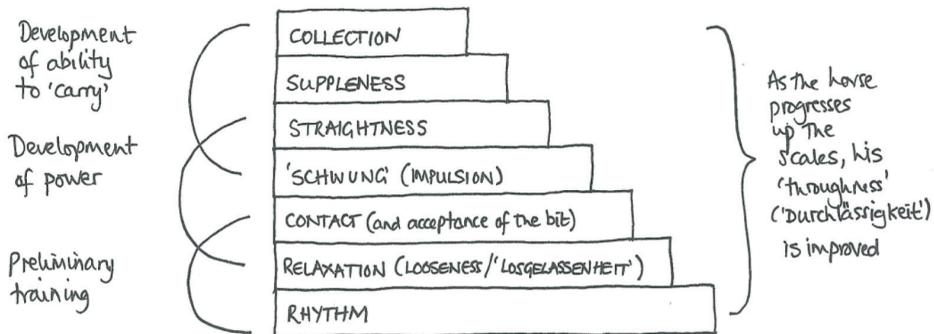
A description of requirements of the horse’s development can be found in references to the ‘Training Scales’. The Training Scales are often associated with German riders and trainers of the twentieth century given their development out of the work of Steinbrecht (Zettle, 1998, p12) and their acceptance and implementation by the very successful German equitation teams in this and the previous century (German National Equestrian Federation (GNEF), 1997, p136-141).

The GNEF handbook explains that the training of a horse is to be considered as:

... a programme of systematic physical education, or a ‘gymnasticising’ process, aimed at developing to the full the horse’s natural physical and mental attitudes and making it into an obedient riding horse with a broadly based training, and one which it is a pleasure to ride (p136).

The influence of this sentiment is clearly visible in the Root Definition belonging to the Danish (German trained) classical rider/trainer described above. The term ‘systematic’ seems to refer to an ordered method of training and

Figure 3. The Training Scales (adapted from German National Equestrian Federation (1997) p136 and Zettle (1998) Figure 1: The scales of training)



may be adopted in this methodical way by some not firmly embedded in the classical approach.

Although the term 'systemic' is not mentioned the interdependency of the different levels is recognized as the GNEF (1997) state:

None of the... qualities can be considered in isolation – they are all independent. They must be developed in accordance with a systematic plan, though not singly and in a rigid order (p137).

The training scales (illustrated in Figure 3) show progressive steps of outcomes to be sought in the training of the well schooled horse. There are sometimes arguments as to the meaning of some of the terms (e.g. 'schwung' and Durchlässigkeit) as meaning is lost in the translation from German to English. However, the hierarchy of elements is clear and Zettle (1998) explains the underlying systemic nature of the training scales:

These elements can be thought of in terms of the three pairs (rhythm-relaxation, impulsion-contact, straightness- suppleness) leading to collection. Rhythm and relaxation go together throughout the horse's training. Schwung is the 'go' for which contact provides the control.

Suppleness is the softness and flexibility which is needed for straightness. Collection is the embodiment of them all. (p14)

This last point helps to link the practicalities of the systematic training scales to the discussion of the purposeful human activity that is Classical Dressage. Zettle explains that when attaining the highest level of the scale, collection: "while the rider will have feelings of riding more and more uphill, the end result will be both horse and rider truly in heaven" (ibid. p14).

Equifinality: The Many Roads to Rome.

Whilst the Training Scales discussed above represent an approach to explaining the systematic process of training, the way in which these accepted principles are achieved seem to generate conflict (e.g. Classic versus Classique, 2007). Even the idea of the contents and order of a training scale may be disputed. For example, Karl, whose riding and teaching is influenced by the French classical rider/trainer Baucher (1919) offers an alternative Training scale (Karl, 2008, pp156-158) which he teaches in his School of 'Légèreté' which offers a classical training programme. Given such conflict, the challenge is to understand how particular

exercises and techniques work, to be able to 'read' the horse, and to know what is required at any point in time. The following of method without reflection is not part of the classical approach. Belasik (1990) offers an insight into his personal moment of realization of this aspect of the classical approach. In his search for an understanding of and excellence in the practice of classical dressage, he explains his growing frustration and almost destructive anger at the complexity and conflict he witnesses as he travels to train with respected trainers around the world.

At a point where he is almost in despair he understands, suddenly, there may be more than one way to achieve an end result, and 'rules' are to *support* learning:

Then, almost at dusk, in all its ridiculous simplicity, I feel the answer. All the tension is gone. These masters are not all wrong. They are all right! There are great piaffes in Portugal, but there are great piaffes in France, Russia, England, Spain, Austria and Germany; and there are great piaffes in America. How could five, ten or fifteen horses be trained differently and independently, yet all be doing the exact same movement correctly? It is now clear to me that different paths can lead to the same result. In western education we are so steeped in our precious scientific method that it seems inconceivable that there could be more than one correct answer for a question or problem. In reality there are all kinds of correct answers simultaneously existing side by side. You can take your pick. They will all work if correctly applied. There seems to be no such thing as only one correct answer, but there is only one correct way of answering. (Belasik, 1990. p76).

Systems Map Section 6: Environmental Factors and the Parts Making the Whole

The classical approach recognizes the influences of many different factors on its practice. Some of the issues have been discussed above, such as the rider's way of thinking and learning in order

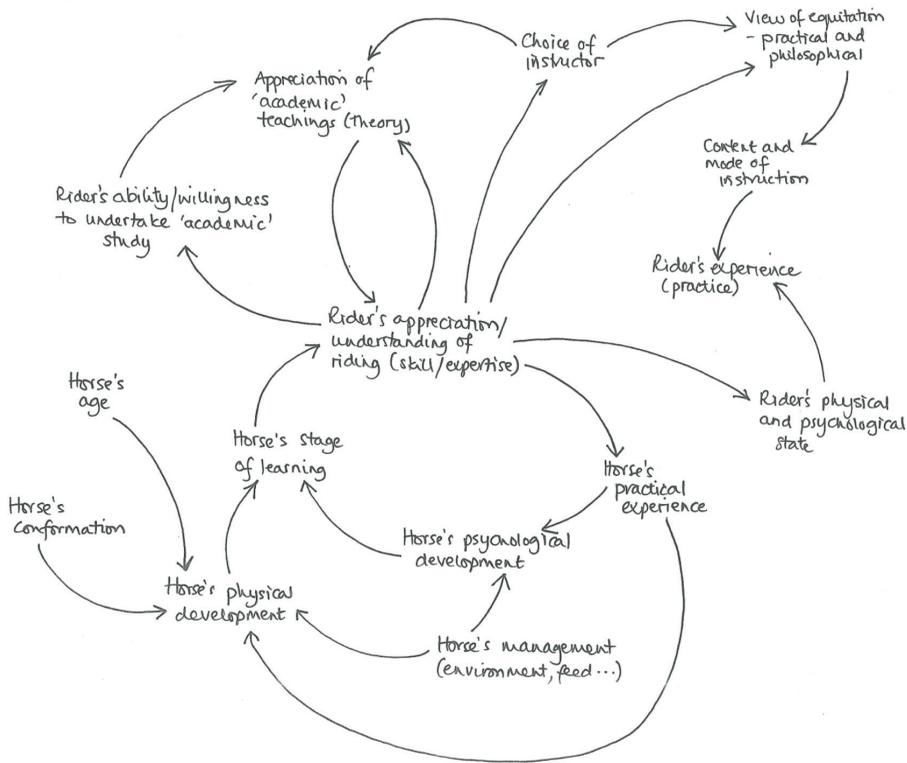
to improve practice and the reflective nature of a process oriented rather than technique lead approach. However, other environmental factors are presented in the literature by commentators from the earliest times, such as the horses breeding (and therefore its conformation and psychological characteristics), and the horse management system in place which includes the horse's general care, its feed, and the work of its veterinarian and farrier (e.g. Xenophon, c380BC; Newcastle, 1658; de la Guérinière, 1733). Zettle (2007) adds other influencing factors for those horses in competition such as owners, grooms and judges. Figure 4 attempts to illustrate the many parts of the whole of 'classical dressage' and their interaction.

The representation Figure 4 shows the central element of the rider's appreciation of equitation. This appreciation is acquired as a result of their knowledge, both theoretical (from reading) and practical (from riding) and out of this knowledge comes reflection and judgment which feeds back into the cyclical process of appreciating (or learning). The influence of an instructor or trainer may be considerable. In the lower part of the diagram we see the influences of and on the horse. Given the complexity of this set of interacting parts it is not surprising that it takes many years of dedicated study for both rider and horse to attain the high ideals of the classical approach: it is a long journey with no 'quick fixes' for either party.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The story presented above is the result of the author using her understanding of interpretive, or 'soft', systems theory to help make sense of a very old tradition for the training and riding of horses. There are other attempts on-going to help us learn more about the special relationship between humans and horses. These attempts are from a scientific perspective. Scientific research relevant to riding or dressage is tending to focus on issues that have a welfare factor. For example, one particular area attracting attention in the field of equitation

Figure 4. Multiple-cause diagram showing complex interacting factors of an 'academic' or 'classical' approach to equitation (Classical Dressage)



is the application of learning theory to horse training and management (e.g. McGreevy & McLean, 2007; McLean & McGreevy, 2010). Such work demands we accept the underlying behavior model on which learning theory is based. Whilst such an approach may be valuable to help us understand and promote 'ethical' interaction between horse and rider, it offers little in the way of biomechanical advice nor does it explain the rider's own reactions and emotions. Other examples include research into the position of the horse's head and neck (e.g. von Dierendonck *et al.*, 2012) and tension on the reins (e.g. Clayton *et al.*, 2003; Glibmann & König von Borstel, 2012). The results are interesting but such studies seem to encourage more specific and detailed analysis of individual

parts of very complex processes. The danger of such an approach is a lack of any context in which to judge and use the outputs of the science. For example when judging rein tension, the results do not tell us whether the tension comes from the rider using their hands, their back or whether it is a result of the horse pulling. The implications for this lack of understanding are serious in terms of erroneous interpretation (e.g. Belasik, 2009, pp74-5).

The need to try to understand the nature of the horse/rider relationship necessitates more than a scientific approach: systemic analysis is most important to help us investigate this purposeful human activity in order to try to understand the complex whole that is the horse-human relationship. In the various sections

above we have looked at the role of history, culture and tradition and how these things have evolved into what we call 'classical' dressage: The past is very important to the present. We have explored the purpose of an activity that seems to exist for no real practical reason other than for the art form itself. The motivation for continuing this activity seems to be often for the pure joy of witnessing the 'brilliance' that can be experienced when horse and rider become 'one'. The horse offers us something that we treasure very highly. We have considered what would appear to be an important emergent property of this activity which is not just the training of the horse but also the training of the rider. Learning to ride well in the classical style is a lifetime's work and the journey will force the rider to confront their own fears, worries, anger, confusion as well as the problems of the 'ego'. Linked to this we have explored the idea of the importance of process over technique in the classical 'journey' and the way in which external measurement makes little sense in an activity where so much is dependent upon 'feel' and what might be referred to as 'internal' validation. This has been an important point in illustrating one of the differences between the classical and 'competitive' dressage where external assessment is the way in which success is measured. The objective measurement of an art form is difficult and yet this is, largely, the approach in dressage competition.

In the above discussion we have considered the 'aids' as the vehicle of communication and the rider's 'seat' as the governor of action which is used judiciously in the work towards 'collection' which is the result of long training and perfect communication and control between horse and rider. True collection is the foundation of brilliance and harmony; the two (horse and rider) acting as 'one'. We have seen how the classical tradition has many exercises and movements that are used to train the horse progressively through various defined 'scales', or 'levels'. But we have also seen that there is

a need to understand that there may be many different ways to implement a set of principles.

The aim in this paper has been to offer a description of classical dressage as seen through a 'systems' lens. The work presented provides an overview of the many parts which make up the classical approach and explores the way in which they might be considered to fit together as a whole. The whole is, without doubt, complex and requires a reflective rider capable of weaving together theory and practice within general principles. A procedural, step-by-step, method is not a suitable model for the classical approach. For the author there is a deep feeling that all these parts fit together as a sensible and reasonable whole. She hopes to continue the exploration of these parts and the whole for many years to come.

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