

# What is Classical Dressage?

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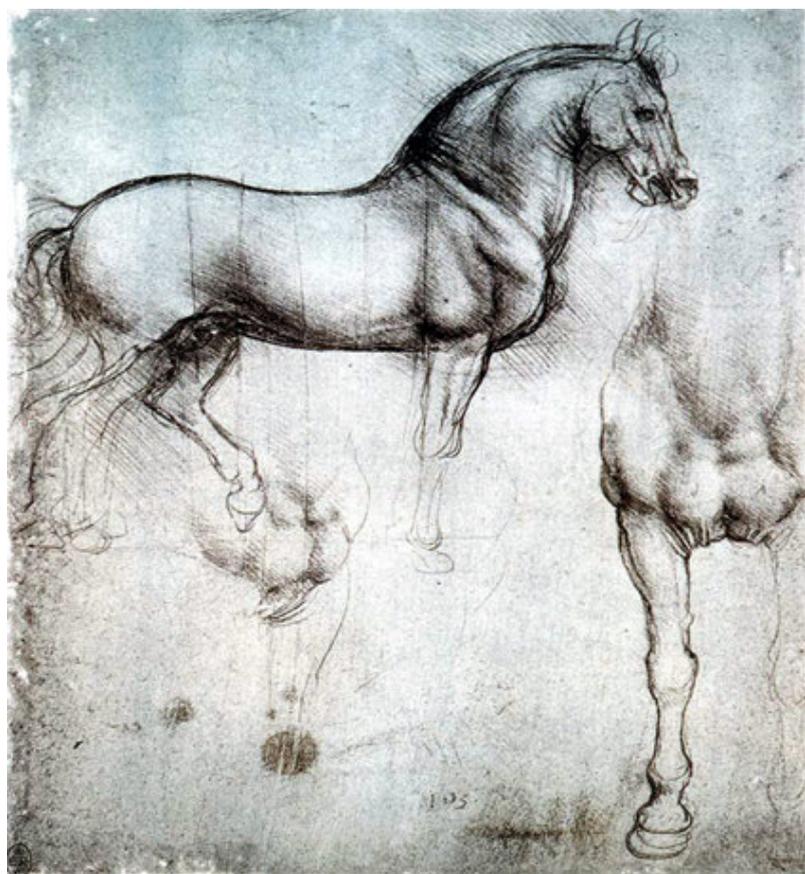
## What is Classical Dressage?

The history of dressage goes back beyond the Renaissance period but it was during this era and then into the Baroque period when riding truly evolved into an art for art's sake rather than its previous utilitarian use for battle. It was during this exciting period that a generally more collected and agile posture was adopted and the movements such as shoulder in, flying changes and the airs above the ground were practised. The riding halls of the day were smaller than we are used to today and collection and lightness became the all-encompassing goals.

Classical dressage considers the whole horse (mental and physical) and is a system of gymnastic training that encourages the horse to be light, supple and strong enough to carry us into their old age. In a world that expects fast results the ideals of classical dressage might seem somewhat old fashioned to many but in truth the gymnastic training of horses has always been the cornerstone of classical principles leading to a posture that allows horses to work unfettered by their human whilst showing their natural brilliance. This gymnastic work allows the horse to carry itself with elegance and perform movements that are seen when the horse moves at liberty under its own energies, the true ability to dance together as a partnership with a lightness that can honestly be called art.

## So how does classical differ from modern?

Well in origins there are no differences, modern day dressage traces itself back to the same roots as



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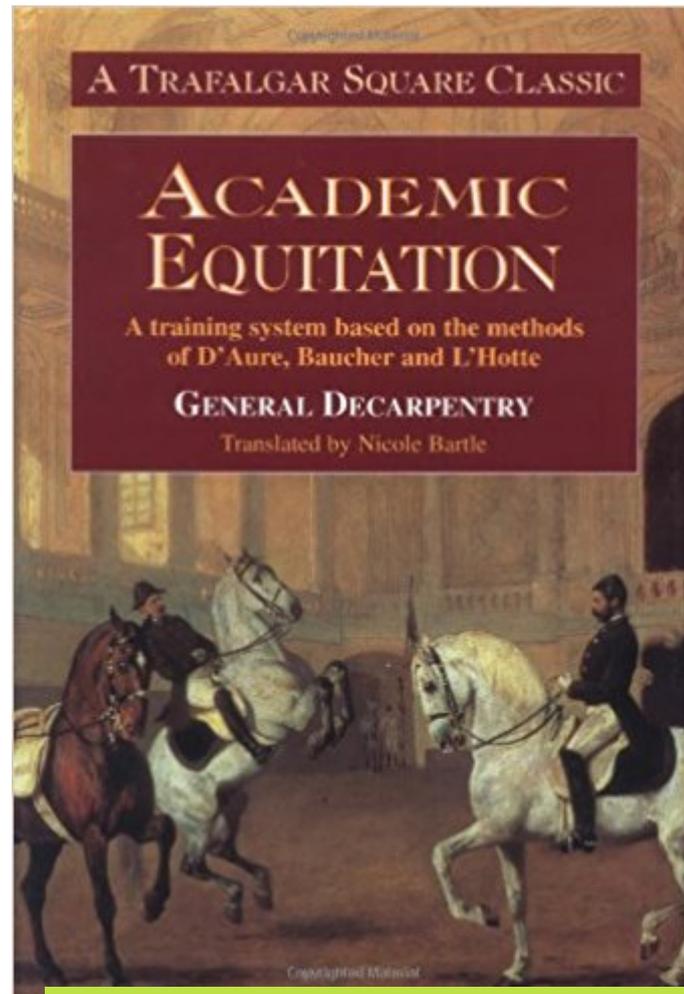
# Classical Dressage is for anyone.

classical so in essence there is no classical versus modern, indeed this is an issue for me and is why I've never actually termed myself as a classical trainer. So if all is well and modern day dressage is based on classical principles why do we have a constant debate between the two? Well it could be said that it's really just the case that modern dressage has evolved along different lines with competition horses being bred to win and these horses being trained using very different methods due to their conformational differences. It is also true that art and sport have different end goals and therefore have evolved different methods. The art of dressage is something that is to be appreciated and judged by a different set of rules than the dressage of competition.

In the 1920's General Decarpentry, himself a classical trainer in the French style, and the FEI committee wrote the rules for competition dressage and the modern day sport of dressage was born. The rules were written in French and many believe that the problems stemmed from this early period of the sport when such phrases as 'on the bit' were arrived at as translations of 'dans la main' when in French this refers to being light with the horse carrying himself without relying on the hand. There then ensued a period when lip service was paid to lightness and the true education of the mouth resulting in dressage horses being much more fixed at the front end whilst riders attempted to ride the horse from behind to a still, accepting hand. With some of the large moving dressage horses that were being bred specifically for the sport a much more physical style of riding/training emerged to overtake the original art of lightness and balance.

There has been a general upsurge of interest in classical training recently so I was pleased to help create the Baroque (classical) class at Interdressage but how would a classical class be judged? The ability for the judge to detach themselves, without prejudice, from the natural ability of the horse is important. Rewarding marks for good training according to conformation and ability. Ultimately allowing for good marks when horses are being trained to their full potential, thus making a more level playing field whether you train a native (see Omar Rabia's book below) or a dressage breed.

In the late 90's The Classical Riding Club designed their dressage tests and a new system of marking whereby the individual movements are not marked but three sections (gaits, general aspects and



**General Decarpentry, trainer and author, in the French style.**

rider) are awarded marks much like the freestyle music tests of British Dressage. Judges are able to invest more time in watching the partnership before them as they don't have to give a mark and comment for each movement. This also allows for good training to be rewarded rather than just the horses with outstanding movement gaining high scores. It also allows judges scope to assess how the training is progressing and what areas the rider/handler needs to work on.

In-hand work is very much part of training in the Iberian schools and at the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, allowing the trainer to work alongside the horse to supple and

# In-hand work is very much part of training in the Iberian schools



Using lateral work to supple, straighten and balance the horse

strengthen the horse with or without a rider. In-hand work is often used as a warm up before ridden work and gives the trainer a real feel/vision for what's happening which is very useful during the subsequent ridden work.

The work is usually practised with a minimum of tack, just a cavesson with two reins to get started or a simple snaffle bridle or bitless bridle and a long whip (may be used although not essential) to touch areas of the horse that are out of reach of the trainer. The usual position of the handler is at the shoulder of the horse but this very much depends on the partnership and how energetic the horse is; both sides should be worked equally.

The aim of the early work in-hand is to have the horse moving nicely forwards under his own energy and then use lateral bending work to supple, straighten and balance him. The horse and handler should give the impression that the work is effortless, harmonious and that the gaits are kept pure and regular. Particular attention should be paid to correct lateral bend and positioning through each movement.

This style of work is not about driving the horse forward towards the bit. Particular attention should be paid to the horse maintaining his own forward energy and then adding in the lateral work. Using turning on the forehand (and giravolta which is a moving turn on the forehand) to help direct the quarters and encourage the horse to find his natural balance. Leg yield being introduced to keep the shoulder mobile whilst adding in the movement of the quarters. The very beginnings of shoulder-in will then be introduced along with reinback. What follows is a gradual gymnasticising of the horse towards the ultimate collection required for piaffe, passage and the airs above the ground. This work is a lifetime's goal; there

# Do it for the purity of the experience, wherever it takes you..

are no quick fixes and no gadgets just a gradual progression through clearly defined communication with the horse.

To conclude this very brief summary of classical dressage I would say that classical dressage is for anyone and any breed of horse. It concerns itself with the love of training and creation of beauty rather than the love of competition. The gains of training in true lightness are easily seen at grass roots level for without this strong base we can never hope to progress to truly dancing with our horses.

Finally a quote from Paul Belasik's Dressage for the 21st Century "You might already have decided to take up the practice of dressage. You might think that I have implied that you will have to choose - picking sport or picking art. But this is not our real choice at all: a bad artist is as bankrupt as a bad athlete. Your decision has to be whether you will decide to do it right: without a desire for gain, for profit, for the reason of ego. Do it for the purity of the experience, wherever it takes you-for the love and excitement of

the trip."

## Amongst many books on the subject these are a few of my favourites:

- Paul Belasik      Dressage for the 21st Century
- Philippe Karl     The Art of Riding
- Oliver Hilberger   Schooling Exercises In-hand
- Anja Beran        Classical Schooling with the Horse in mind
- Udo Burger        The Way to Perfect Horsemanship
- Alfons Dietz        Training the horse In Hand
- W. Seunig          Horsemanship
- Omar Rabia        Cobs Can

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