

The Spanish Riding School Vienna

Keeper Of The Grail - The Spanish Riding School at a time of Great change by Sylvia Loch

Four hundred years of unbroken tradition...

One rider for one horse...

Eight years to train him...

Humility and service; perfection the ultimate goal...

Amongst a myriad further interpretations, all this adds up to just one thing, the Classical Ideal. This is the ideal which still pervades the rarified atmosphere of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna - you can physically feel it. The ideal which started in Athens, smouldered its way through a turbulent history, finally to emerge like a flaming torch after the Renaissance, and burn itself into the subconsciousness of those great masters of the arts. It fell to them in turn to establish and pass on those well rehearsed and assimilated guidelines to future generations.

The idea that cavalry tactics constituted an art had started with Xenophon around 402 BC, but it was under the Bourbon-Austro-Hungarian alliance of the 16th Century that the idea of classical riding took root throughout the courts of civilised Europe. During the Baroque era, manege riding enjoyed an equal footing with music, art, architecture, literature, philosophy, sculpture and the designing of beautiful gardens, since similar skills and disciplines were required. In this vein, great importance was placed on the partnership between noble horse and noble man. In some circumstances, it was noted that the acquisition of this art could make a man more honourable as he learned from his stallion's forbearance, courage and physical prowess.

Thus, the work of the Spanish Riding School first under royal, then imperial and finally Austrian state patronage flourished. Together with the opera house, the Winter Riding School at the Hofburg had become the jewel in the crown. Since no other riding school boasted such a structured continuance of purpose and method, it was looked up to worldwide as the mecca for dressage or manege riding. Only at Vienna could one be sure of finding all the answers; only here were the correct techniques and structured training methods of the young horse through to the most venerable adult stallions, practised and graven in stone.

Today, the male riders are still carefully selected from within Austria itself and if found of sufficient talent and dedication, tutelage will start at 16 and end at 60. Riders have to be disciplined and highly committed, for the path ahead is not easy. If it takes 8 years to train a horse, it takes a lifetime to become a rider. Even the wisest of the Oberbereiter will never say they have finished learning. Every horse is different, every horse has something to offer, to teach his rider.

So do these traditional values still have meaning as the School approaches a time of inevitable change, since the state has just privatised this great national institution? Can it survive into the 21st Century as a preserver of the Classical Ideal, a last bastion of unbroken tradition where excellence without compromise is the yardstick? Will horsemen and horsewomen the world over continue to be influenced by it? Will the Classical Ideal be kept alive?

Recently, the term 'traditional values' has been much overused. Moreover, in terms of riding, tradition is positively rejected by many. There is a new breed of owner about, urbanised people with no background of horses, for whom the concept of taking time and developing a close relationship is clearly foreign. Lack of awareness leads to exploitation. Equestrian catalogues and glossy magazines promise instant competitive success with this or that new gadget or method. Sadly for horses, the Emperor's new clothes syndrome abounds. Expectations are high, so for every rider who previously would expect to put in years of study and painstaking work, there are as many, if not more, looking for an easy option.

Perhaps none of this would matter, were it not for the fact that a horse is not a high performance vehicle, no matter what the price tag. You may indeed buy an Olympic horse, custom built and fully trained and honed, if willing to pay sufficient euros; but, someone else will have done the work. Unfortunately, no amount of money can buy the years of knowledge needed to school a horse to Grand Prix level and without Vienna to show us by its rich example, standards will fall. True masters recognise that the education of the horse has to be developed, step by step, stage by stage, over many years and it is a curious and irrational failing of the system that competitors today are no longer required to do this themselves. Indeed, dressage must be the only Olympic discipline where the contender does not necessarily have to be the athlete in the broader sense of the word.

For all his power and strength, the horse is undeniably one of God's most sensitive creatures. Pressurised in his training, or crudely ridden, the horse may 'break down' in the same way as a human, if time, kindness and patience is not taken. Fashions may change by the day, but flesh and blood, muscle and joints, and the inner complications of the equine mind remain the same. What was appropriate in Xenophon's time is just as applicable today. What might take a master horseman eight years to achieve in former times, cannot and should not be any different in the modern age. The Spanish Riding School of Vienna still recognises this, but without their unswerving stance, who else is there to argue the case for the dressage horse? Who can protect him from abuse?

Until recently, the majority of British riders came mainly from rural backgrounds, but with the threat to hunting and hacking from urban development and government interference in field sports, things are changing fast. Today's riders may never have experienced the patience required to house-train a puppy, bottle-feed a lamb or sense when an animal is in pain. Awareness in these matters cannot be learned overnight, you have to be around animals 24 hours a day really to understand them.

So the continued existence of the Spanish Riding School is vital. Its strength has always lain in its unswerving refusal to break with tradition or to compromise. So how should it tread for the future? Clearly, commercial interests must never be at the expense of excellence, or it will lose the love and support of its greatest admirers. Unless it remains as an exemplar, pure and unsullied, the millions who are drawn there will fade away.

In a world where all seems instant, telecommunications, the internet, food, travel - there is a lasting strength about Vienna. People want to be reminded that some things, like a precious work of art, require time, study, method, observation, patience and feeling. It draws them back to their roots. The traditions laid down both at Piber, the foundation stud for the breeding of the magical Lipizzaners and at Vienna, the academy of riding, will continue to appeal - provided it remains constant and true to itself.

Here there are no glittering prizes, just the knowledge that a relationship, a work of art between horse and rider is in progress. Clearly, the riders share the same air that the horses breathe, hear the same sounds; and in working with the same horse day after day, year after year, develop the most subtle of techniques. This is the gift from the horses themselves - a prize in a different form, a language. Minute nuance of balance, invisible body signals fed back from rider to horse and horse to rider, this is the prize!... as serenely, calmly, they exult and delight in each other's work - a response to each growing, confident, glowing, athletic step.

No one would deny the genuine glamour that competitive dressage enjoys today, but strangely perhaps, it has taken years to motivate the public to want to pay money to watch those slim-thighed young women in top hat and tails vying with their elegant male counterparts for trophies and points. Amidst the hype, the smell of expensive leather and the creme de la creme of horseflesh, despite the anticipation of the congnoscenti, hushed and scrutinous in the grandstands, somehow, somewhere - as the winner takes all - there is something missing.

Yet, amongst the faithful public who troop time and again to see The Spanish Riding School of Vienna, many know little of the intricacies of horses or indeed of dressage. They go because they are drawn. There is something mystical and magnetic about the dancing white stallions, and here - with no prizes to get in the way - people can lose themselves in the real thing. Transported to a world where time stands still, there is the wonder of man and beast working as one. The mutual trust, the respect built over so many years shines through the dancing steps until an almost spiritual merging of body and mind unfolds before their eyes. The centaur comes alive!...that vision of unity and union, human and horse, still enjoying the same exercises, the same flowing movement, and controlled freedom that has always brought tears to the eyes of all who behold the proud Lipizzan of Vienna in their moment of glory!