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...
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.
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