Chapter 10

Understanding the Whole From the Parts:
A Systemic Analysis of Classical Dressage

Daune West
University of the West of Scotland, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter 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 author uses her interpretive systems perspective to explore classical dressage theory and practice and, throughout, uses examples from the classical equitation literature to support and illustrate the analysis presented. The chapter offers a description of classical dressage from considering its component parts and suggests that it concerns not only the “correct” and ethical training and riding of horses but, fundamentally, the personal development of the trainer/rider. The chapter concludes by (1) inspecting the relationship between classical and competition dressage and suggests that they contain important elements that are mutually exclusive and (2) considering the potential contribution of “systems” to the study of the human-horse relationship as complementary to the increasingly popular approach of equitation science.

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INTRODUCTION

Classical Dressage is an approach to the training and riding of horses that, according to its commentators, 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 very rich literature and is practiced worldwide but 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 explore how they can augment the natural movement and beauty of the horse when ridden. In the past, the reasons for following the Classical path have been varied but today it is frequently considered to be an art form by its proponents. 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 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’).

Over the last thirty years or so, the training methods of some successful international dressage riders have been severely criticized (e.g. Heuschmann, 2006; 2012) since they appear, to some, not only to breach ethical boundaries but also to be practicing equitation that has moved a long way away from what some argue to be the ‘correct’, tried and trusted ‘classical’ methods developed over the last millennium. Arguments about the ethics of one particular training method, rollkur and its associated LDR (low, deep, round), adopted by some competitors, are rife today online (e.g. Shand, 2017; https://epona.tv/farewell-falsterbo). Calls to return to the ‘classical’ traditions represented and intended when competitive dressage was first established has kindled increased interest in the approach over the last few years. However, what exactly constitutes ‘classical’ is not easily recognized or agreed: there are many examples of individual trainers and riders who claim a classical approach, some who adhere strictly to the teachings of one or another classical ‘master’, some who ‘mix and match’ influences, and some who seem to use the classical label as a marketing tool but with little classical content in their work. Unsurprisingly, individual’s and groups’ defense of the ‘classicism’ of their approach have been vigorous, even aggressive at times.

The author of this paper has been a student of Classical Dressage for more than fifteen years: originally, it was the relief in finding a way of riding that was not so rule-based, that addressed nuances and the complexities of the human horse relationship, that offered thoughtful analysis, and a rich supply of approaches to
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