

THE SPANISH RIDING SCHOOL OF VIENNA

- THE REAL THING -

- FOUR CENTURIES OF DISCIPLINE AT THE SPANISH RIDING SCHOOL

by Sylvia Loch



In a world where cheap imitation has become possible and all too frequent, where copy cat performance, mimicry and even lookalike people are increasingly accessible and acceptable, where easy rewards and undeserved media attention is commonplace, perhaps it is not so surprising when the demands of our all-for-nothing society lead to inroads being made into the realm of art itself.

Spurred on by ambition and a constant need for self gratification at every turn, there are many groups of individuals nowadays who exploit the ignorance of the unsuspecting to posture in an authoritative and authentic role, when clearly this is not the case. Often masquerading under grandiose titles, clever marketing allows these posers to strut the world stage and to become accepted as the real thing. Unfortunately it is those unworthy practitioners of their field who are not at all the ‘real thing’ and who often denigrate and harm the very art they purport to revere.

Fortunately there are others who see through the glitz and hype, not at all taken in by the scenario of the Emperor’s new clothes. They may be reading these words even now. Where quality is recognised, work that is wise, logical, structured and applied with patience, humility and humanity will be cherished and admired. Like a diamond, purist, clean, classical art stands apart and is appreciated by the connoisseur because it shines out in a way which shows the imitation to be flawed. Thus, the work of those who have dedicated a lifetime to unlimited practice, study and welltried methodology transcends all those pale imitations and gives hope to new disciples.

In this way the Spanish Riding School lives on and reigns supreme in a world where sadly, there may soon be insufficient connoisseurs to protect the classical art of riding unless we *all* make it our business to help keep it alive and flourishing.

The way forward is shown by the noble Lipizzaners themselves. Their story of survival through the ages and their continued courage and willingness to serve in partnership with man, brings a particular brand of magic to a horse world nowadays more dominated by the demands of sport than of art. The lure of gold medals, sponsorship deals and a name in the record books sometimes threatens the time-honoured principles in the rush to succeed. Great Britain is proud of its horse culture, and it is up to those who really love horses, not in a material sense but in appreciation of the wonderful creature in our care, to promote all that the Vienna School stands for.

Often we need to remind ourselves that the horse is not a mere household pet; however domesticated, he is still in essence a sensitive, fiery, spirited creature of the wild. Were it not for a very social nature and a genuine desire for friendship, it is doubtful he would ever allow himself to be ridden.

When training is less concerned with material rewards, and the rationale for training becomes a celebration of the natural beauty, movement, nobleness and partnership of the horse, education and enlightenment has a chance to grow. That is why Vienna's Lipizzaners and the traditional work of the Spanish Riding School provides such an important link with the past and the present. For the sake of the horse and of tomorrow's horsemen and women who will ride him, we ignore that inherited knowledge at our peril.

For those who are baffled by a world where true quality is not always rewarded, where painstaking work and dedication is not necessarily the status quo, we should take heart from the example of the Lipizzaner Stud at Piber which provides the proud stallions for the Vienna School. The Stud Farm is one of the most successful in the world and is visited annually by thousands of visitors. Here, breeding programmes enjoy all the latest scientific knowledge, but horses continue to be reared in the wild, and in the herd system so that they may develop as all horses should, with a sense of family, feeling the earth beneath their feet, testing their strength over hill and valley, running with the wind and knowing the joy of liberty to pit their strength and speed against the elements of the universe.

At the School itself, the same painstaking respect and love for the horse is reiterated and upheld in the training programmes. Each stallion is treated as an individual; each is allowed to grow and mature in his work at his own pace. There are no shortcuts; the work is supervised and structured, imbued with an integrity that has allowed horses to want to offer the amazing feats of athleticism and gymnastic wizardry which they display in performance. The white stallions of Vienna are breathtaking!

The difference between the classical traditions of schooling and some of today's less attractive methods of sportshorse training, should not be so difficult to spot. There is a look of noble purpose in the eye of the Spanish Riding School Lipizzaner as he comes before the crowds; when pride and other emotions are allowed to blossom, the work takes on a unique, calm, but joyful quality. How different is this from the anxious refusals of a horse beaten over practice jumps, a sight all too frequent nowadays, even at the most prestigious county shows; how different too from the stacatto, robotlike actions of a competition dressage horse struggling to perform despite the hardest of hands and most uneducated of seats. How sad is the dull, disinterested look in the eye of many a riding school hack, whose worth is measured in terms of how many hours he can labour. Abuse which should have ended in the days of cab horses and Black Beauty is still rife, even in this green and pleasant land of ours.

More than at any time, perhaps, the flame of love and of understanding needs to be rekindled if horses are not to become our slaves and we are not to lose touch with what it means to be a horse.

None of us should be too proud to take a lesson from the Austrians. By leading the way, the Spanish Riding School helps us all to become more aware, empowered to understand the differences of what is acceptable for horses and what is clearly not.

Perhaps the need to be brought back to a foundation of wisdom, an international seat of learning, is not so surprising in an age when songs can be created on an electronic machine which can mimic brass, woodwind and string, without its controller having ever studied a single scale or arpeggio. It is probably unrealistic to expect that equitation might escape the ravages of modernity, but in the Spanish Riding School, we have an antidote.

The logical contribution of every one of us who cares must be to encourage our youth to see and to learn from 'the real thing'. The other arts are thankfully, well supported, painting, good opera, classical music, sculpture and architecture now draws more aficionados than at any one time since the war and this should be encouraging for classical equitation.

For this reason, above all else, we owe it to the horse, as part of God's creation, to uphold those academies where he is still properly understood and thoughtfully treated. No horse should be shut away as a prisoner without love, brotherhood, or the feel of the wind in his mane. No horse should be kept in isolation, or trained in ignorance or pain.

And so to duty - if we truly love horses, we must ensure that the art of horsemanship which has been upheld by Vienna and in those few last remaining academies of equestrian art is well supported and never allowed to die out. The Spanish Riding School Lipizzaners are not an anachronism, they present a living masterpiece of classical art. More important they provide each and every person who owns horses and who ride them, with a role model. Those peerless Lipizzaners which come before the public full of proud, prancing, pristine movement with their quiet, discreet and disciplined riders, centaurlike in the saddle, are a testimony to art.

It was an English cavalry officer, Earl of Pembroke who acknowledged the need for greater finesse, understanding and education in riding when he wrote in 1778:

“Equitation is confessedly a science; every science is founded upon principles and theory must indispensably be necessary, because what is truly just and beautiful cannot depend upon chance...”

For this reason we cannot leave it to chance to protect the horse into the new millennium; the time has come for us all to vote with our feet. Thank you for doing so tonight. Long live the Spanish Riding School of Vienna!