

The Pleasure of Prazer

Let me introduce myself – I am an average person, rapidly approaching my half-century and deeply committed to my small collection of ponies and horses.

I have always been an admirer of the Spanish Riding School, having been absolutely bowled over by the live rehearsals and performance I was lucky enough to attend at the School during a trip to Vienna sometime back in the 1980s, although I didn't really appreciate then what it was that I was looking at. I could see that the horses were "dancing" and that their riders seemed to sit totally still and straight, even when the horses were leaping up in the air and standing on their hind legs. Nothing seemed to budge these riders, and I was very, very impressed!

Apart from a general love of animals, horses were a complete mystery to me until I started riding – quite by accident at the suggestion of a flat-mate – in my early thirties, but I was immediately bitten by the bug, and have never been very far away from a horse ever since. I always kept a picture of those Spanish Riding School riders in my head, and often asked where I could learn to ride like that – to which the answer always seemed to be "at the Spanish Riding School, of course!"

However hard I tried throughout my riding career, I gained the distinct impression that Classical Riding wasn't really a bona fide subject for discussion around the yard, dressage was for boring people, and there certainly weren't any classical instructors within easy reach of home. So the subject was put on the back burner, and I just continued to ride as best I could until I moved to my current home. Once again I asked around, and – miracle of miracles!- I found Anne Wilson living just a few villages away. Anne gave me some lessons and introduced me to the Classical Riding Club, and finally things started to fall into place. By then, I had backed and brought on my two Dales ponies to the point where the mare was a slightly quirky but generally pleasant and responsive ride at the age of 9, and the gelding was just starting his ridden career at the age of 4. I also started to read about Classical Riding and, of course, to go to CRC events, where I watched enthralled as Sylvia recreated my early experience of the Spanish Riding School with her wonderful demonstrations on the lovely Espada, only now I also had a basic understanding of what was going on. I just had to ride one of those Lusitanos, and to cut a long story short, at the beginning of this month I took a holiday in the Scottish borders and had the absolute honour and privilege of two lessons on Sylvia's fabulous stallion, Prazer. Prazer, in Portuguese, means "pleasure", and he is very aptly named.

In her demonstrations, Sylvia talks a lot about "feel", and this is one of the things which struck me most about riding a correctly schooled horse. I was able to feel every movement of each of Prazer's legs so clearly, such is his degree of engagement and collection. My initial impression was that very little was needed from me to achieve a very clear reaction from him. The difference between "impulsion" and "speed" finally made sense as well. You can feel impulsion coming from behind you – even at the halt!

The other enormous difference was my seat. All discussion about saddles fitting both the horse and the rider aside, Prazer's saddle felt very deep and comfortable to me, and I was able to position myself back on my seat bones, while still retaining my "three points", and really drop my legs around his girth. I found that I had clearly been riding with my legs too far back and my body tipped forward as I couldn't understand why Prazer kept going backwards when I didn't want him to. As soon as I put my legs forward a little, however, Prazer immediately stopped reversing and stood still. His transitions were a dream, and only a tiny nudge was required to obtain trot.

After a lifetime of office work, my shoulders tend to roundness and I have always looked to my riding to help save me from that, but the combination of shoulders back and down, and the feeling of "hanging" from my diaphragm with my head high was the next novelty – suddenly my legs didn't go back, my elbows fell into place and I felt very secure. I was able to "follow" Prazer round corners,

guiding him gently with my outside leg and offering support with the inside leg without any pressure other than a little weight in the stirrup. Stopping him was merely a matter of an intake of breath, and he easily moved off again when I let go.

As I had never ridden in a double bridle before, and was quite nervous about it, I concentrated on just keeping my hands very still and not interfering with him in any way – this was easy, as Prazer carries himself so beautifully just from his rider's seat and leg aids. However, I should say that I have also clearly been carrying my hands too high because Prazer happily offered me my first experience of "passage" at the slightest involuntary raising of my hands while in trot! Much to my amazement, he also gave me just a taste of "piaffe" when I did no more than close him off at the front with my legs – again, it wasn't a deliberate action, I had tensed up, and Sylvia so kindly helped me to lift this marvel out of something I was actually doing wrong!!

As you have no doubt realised by now, over the course of my two lessons, I was experiencing a whole new set of "feelings" which I knew I had to try and recreate as far as I could in my own ponies, and it also made me appreciate the sensitivity, care and patience – not to mention the talent! – with which Prazer has been taught and the time he has been given to mature into the kind, happy schoolmaster he is. He is certainly a special horse, but I do believe that all horses can be a little like him given the chance.

When I got home, I set to to apply what I had learned to my ponies. Despite being the same breed, my ponies are like chalk and cheese to ride. The biggest difference between them is that the gelding carries himself quite naturally, whereas the mare, who has a much longer neck, does tend to lean on the bit and generally go on her forehead. She also has quite short, sharp steps, and it usually takes me about 20 minutes of hard work to raise her back and head to a level where she can work more easily and fluidly, by which time I'm exhausted! Dales ponies are very short and broad, and wrapping your legs around them can be a challenge. However, the difference in both of them was immediate and extremely pleasing for all three of us. With my new seat – more open hips, much straighter in the back and "hanging" from my diaphragm, my legs fell much more naturally, and the mare lifted her head and moved forward much more freely with very little effort on my part. As a result, I can now move her around the arena just by gently moving my hips, and she has offered me a really nice shoulder-in in both walk and trot. Her canter transition was immediate and she clearly finds it much easier to sustain the canter around corners – her "motor biking" days are now officially over!

My gelding is naturally very supple, his walk is more a swagger, and he has the very high-stepping trot action which is typical of Dales ponies, but he, too, has always been rather slow to move off the leg and, with his india-rubber neck, is difficult to keep straight. However, the realignment of my body has enabled him to collect himself up so that I can now control the length of his strides much more easily. He, too, managed quite an acceptable shoulder-in, although his neck and my hands definitely need more practice. He clearly feels better about my hands being held lower. Being very short-coupled, like the Lusitano, his trot is definitely his easiest pace. He is still rather unbalanced in canter, possibly because he puts so much effort into his leg-work (he raises his forelegs in canter to almost the same level as in trot, which must require enormous effort), so Anne and I will work with him on the lunge before testing him with a rider, even the "new" me.

These are the initial reactions which I have noticed in my ponies' way of going, but even after only two lessons I feel that they are hugely significant. Clearly, this is only the beginning and we still have a long way to go, but with my new ability to "feel", I know I can now go further, and what used to be the old horseman's adage "horses are 99% perspiration and 1% elation" – is now the other way around!

Thank you again, Sylvia and Prazer, for your time and your patience, for giving me such a lot to think about, and for two truly inspiring lessons.