
A meeting of the Classical Arts

Sylvia is the professional horsewoman with a love of music and I am the professional singer with a love of horses. When we met on one of the brighter days in April she revealed her love of music, and as we spoke around the two subjects, a nuanced language emerged.

It's a peculiar thing when you've notched up a few years of teaching. There is a leaning towards a more intuitive and creative dynamic, cutting out the laboured language of institutional learning. So I was immediately comforted by Sylvia's wise and subtle suggestions which in my experience takes decades of honing. It reminds me of a quote I found in Phillippe Karl's 'The Twisted Truths of Dressage: 'What is complicated is unimportant, and what is important is never complicated'.

As our language evolved, Sylvia asked if I would write something for The Classical Riding Club newsletter. What an honour, but I should say from the off that my knowledge is firmly planted in the roots of training voices, not in the finer points of classical riding or equine anatomy. However, both skills require a high level of precise co-ordination without brace and many years of training.

At a tender age, I remember receiving instructions from two of my early teachers, one from a riding school who would bawl "Heels down, sit tall !" from the centre of the school. Whilst my singing teacher would constantly remind me to "Sing from your Little Mary Dear". It took a while before I knew where my 'Little Mary' was ! I didn't dare ask.

They were very direct and demanding orders and one that caused my tender riding and singing muscles to brace. It wasn't the best of starts with either and I've come to know that the early blue-printing is very powerful and creates the fertile soil from which we grow.

Several decades later, I had the luxury of being able to see my horses from the window of my studio in Suffolk. I was drawn to their carriage and in particular to the similarities of the head and neck position when fully engaged in their actions. There was something about the centre of balance that stood out. Our driving horse would often exhibit wonderful lateral movements and even a piaffe in the field when she wanted to impress a new livery. She looked wholly connected from nose to tail. The body and mind were present and engaged in the moment. By comparison, the modern world of pop, rock and musical theatre has its own twisted paths which encourage a disconnection in sound production and nearly always when the belt voice is required. That is the voice that appears when you know you haven't got the technique to sing the climactic high notes. It is accompanied by a forward movement of the neck and collapsing of the cranial sacral vertebrae, similar to that of the long neck of the horse in flight. I recall someone telling me once that when a horse is 'on the bit' or 'collected', that they are in a more vulnerable relationship with the rider, which is the opposite of the fight or flight posture. This goes for the singer too. The forward position of the neck is the 'try' without reference to the correct muscles, and that lack of referencing has consequences on breath, posture, the longterm health of the voice and emotional stability of the performer. Spurious connections perhaps, but interesting nevertheless.

Daring to get slightly more technical, I could think of a few words that have relevance in both worlds such as connection and balance. As a singer, connection relates to everything ! Connection between voice and breath is the primary action, beginning with the cries of an infant to the high art of bel canto, which literally means beautiful singing. For this journey, it is necessary for the two energetic forces to work as a great friendship which takes years of correct muscular development. This could perhaps be compared to the connection between the riders hands and the horses mouth ? A communication that begins with an often rough and basic communication, but has the potential to become light and easy over the years, or as I recently discovered is known in the equine word as 'légèreté'.

Balance is something I can completely relate to as a mature novice rider, or I should say, imbalance. The first experience completely unseated me and I was dumped into A&E, the second was a mis-alignment in my hips which was enough to restrict the left lead canter. I headed for my chiropractor who informed me that any mis-alignment of the hips can also relate to the hyoid bone being mis-aligned in the throat ! My teachers brain was instantly activated and I did some research. I'll try to simplify.

The hyoid bone is the only bone in the body that does not articulate with another bone, in other words it's a floating bone. It is attached to many muscles in the neck and has three main directions. Forwards to the sternum via the Omohyoid muscle which then translates through the ribcage to the shoulder ('omo' is Greek for 'shoulder') and the third upward movement is via an attachment to the tongue. The position of the tongue is highly important in facial development and is affected by mouth breathing and dental work which includes molar extraction and braces in young adults. How could this relate to riding ? It certainly can be life-changing for a singer whose facial structure depends on the natural growth of bone in that area.

An example of this common structural manipulation was highlighted in the story of a promising young tenor of 16, who was also a talented tennis player and skier. In his early teens he had two premolars removed and a brace fitted to straighten the teeth. Whilst at university his vocal quality had deteriorated and he was experiencing serious falls to the right on quick ski turns. The facial structure including the arches was underdeveloped, the tongue was forward and down, the body was in asymmetrical torsion, hence the falls to one side. By working with his singing teacher, a cranial chiropractor and a dentist, his posture, balance and position of the mandible and hyoid bone returned to a normal state and he was able to fulfil his potential as a professional singer.

The asymmetry is especially influential in both arts as I discovered in subsequent riding lessons, one of which was with Sylvia. She asked me to drop the weight of the inside leg into the stirrup. This was a challenge and an eye opener to me, because I had experienced the same balance deficiency early on in my vocal training. Luckily at that time I was studying with an enlightened teacher who thought it might be useful to check whether there was a postural imbalance that was affecting my sound. Sure enough there was! I felt more confident in my sound production when I shifted my balance to the right and when I shifted it to the left I felt less confident and the sound was very slightly different.

Physical balance in the world of voice training is vital and connected to everything from the way a singer places their weight through the foot, to the way the neck carries the head. Within that journey, there are a series of six springs. One of these is the foot spring which operates on three points: an inner arch, an outer arch and the transverse arch. If I

was not properly centred on my feet, could this affect the pelvis which is the second spring and then the diaphragm muscles, the third spring, up towards the Mylohyoid muscle ("mylo" comes from the Greek word for "molar"), the fourth spring which is attached to the tongue. As I mentioned before, the position of the tongue is affected by dental work including molar extraction and braces in young adults. I had braces fitted as a young teenager. How could this have an impact on riding ?

My final angle on the subject is purely anecdotal and is drawn from many singers who have come to me for help with their singing voices and others who have shared their stories. Would it be too much of a stretch to reference further back into childhood where a child who is lacking in confidence might not have known the feeling of standing tall, centred and well balanced. A child who felt intellectually, emotionally or physically inferior and who carried that deficit into their bodies in adult life. Could our familial and social forces have the potential to literally shape our body ? And how could that manifest in our riding ?

I won't attempt to join the dots here, as everyone will have their own story, but I think there is sufficient information to chew over which I invite the reader to ponder.