



Purity of the Gaits Development, Preservation, and Refinement

The movements in riding are really very simple. We have the walk, the trot, the canter. In these three gaits we can introduce variations, like pirouette, shoulder-in and haunches-in, greater degrees of collection and greater extension. All these movements are used in the training of our horse to supple and prepare for collection or to demonstrate and refine the quality of each of the three gaits.

The purity of the gait is the first indication of the quality of your work. Is your walk relaxed, a clear four beat tempo? Is it rushed? Contracted? Shuffling? Anything less than a clear four beat rhythm with a swinging, relaxed back indicates resistance and contraction.

We can follow this through with our other gaits. The trot is a two beat gait on the diagonal. If one side is stabbing the ground and disturbing the rhythm of your 1 - 2 count, there is resistance or contraction. If you have a less than beautiful working trot with elasticity and responsiveness to your rhythm, how will you create a piaffe or passage?

Is your canter truly three-beat? Or are you shuffling along with legs to the rear playing catch-up? Are you sitting in a beautiful rocking chair with a lovely uphill feeling to the depart and strides? Or are you on a flat board with no expressiveness, or rushing off to an unknown destination? Are you controlling the movement with the communication of your vision or are you hauling on the inside rein to slow or transition?

The preservation of the gaits is fundamental to all our training. Every time I see a piaffe that is contracted or lacks equal height and impulsion in the front and back, I know there is an insufficient shoulder-in lurking. Every time I see a canter that is flat, I know that the haunches-in is lacking in quality and impulsion. When I see a restricted or shuffling walk, I know that relaxation is missing in the work.

If you are unclear about these basic movements, refer to *Dressage for the New Age* or my *Barbier Training Companion*. But remember, if your work on any given day is feeling less than optimal, go back to the basics. Walk with a clear vision of regularity and impulsion. Trot with freedom and rhythm. Canter with fluid, uphill movements in three beats. If this is not possible, go back to your work-in-hand and longeing to see where the breakdown is occurring. After you have a clear idea of where there is an insufficiency, commit to doing the basic work before moving back to other movements. Your horse will tell you when he is ready to move on. Have patience.

People ask me “how do I create greater brilliance in my piaffe?” after showing me a mechanical dull trot. It seems obvious when we look at it in this way, right? Refinement of any movement begins with refinement of our gaits. Refinement of the gaits begins with our intent and our ability to generate and communicate clarity of vision to our horses.