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# DRESSAGE FOR NO COUNTRY

He spent a lifetime studying and traveled the world  
in search of "true" dressage. This is what he found.



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## *The Spanish Riding School*

I WAS RIDING IN THE OUTDOOR ARENA when my wife came out of the house, jogging toward me across the grass field. I stopped the exercise and rode over to her. She looked serious.

“Arthur Kottas is on the phone,” she said.

What? I thought, The First Chief Rider of the Spanish Riding School is calling me?

“Here, I’ll take the horse. Hurry up!” she urged.

The call was not completely out of the blue, but nearly. I knew I had to go to Vienna to see the Spanish Riding School and the training they used firsthand. It was the next logical step in my education. A year prior I had contacted Hungarian classical trainer Charles de Kunffy, whom I understood had known Arthur Kottas for a long time. Charles was kind enough to provide an introduction to Kottas, and I wrote him in Vienna, asking if I could come, observe the training, and maybe take a lesson or two. I had never heard back.

Now I was running back to my house to talk to him in person.

Kottas was very gracious. He apologized profusely, as apparently my letter had gotten lost in his communications. He had just found it and felt terrible about the delay. Yes, I would be

welcome, but while he might be able to use his daughter's horse for a lesson, he just didn't have any other school horses available. He would arrange for me to stay in a pension within walking distance of the school. We set up dates, exchanged salutations, and I hung up. I was still in the kitchen, alone. I sat down in a chair. I was going to *the* Spanish Riding School as a guest of the First Chief Rider. I took a few breaths and let it sink in.

*Like Classical Music*

By then, I was a pretty good traveler. I had been routinely flying to teach clinics, but this trip made me more anxious than any I could remember. A lot was at stake. I knew the literature related to the Spanish Riding School inside and out, and it all made sense to me. I was using a great deal of their training system as a blueprint for my own work. But what if, when I saw it firsthand, there was a disconnect? What if when I saw it live, it turned out that I had misinterpreted it? What if it was different from the books and photos when I was there in person? Too late for second thoughts—I was on my way.

I would *not* be late, so I planned to arrive in Vienna early the day before I was to meet with Kottas. The plane connections all went smoothly. Kottas had arranged for a room, as he said, in a pension near the Spanish Riding School, nestled in the heart of the historic city, and after I settled in, I went out to wander. Vienna was beautiful in the fall, already cold enough to warrant a coat. The city looked palatial. I walked over to the school so I would know where to go the next day. It was headed toward evening, and the city glowed in a warm yellow light; the majestic

buildings, the shops with perfect pastries, the whole place felt like classical music. It was imposing but somehow not martial.

That night I had a hard time sleeping. I thought I was coming down with something: I had cold sweats and chills like a fever. I called my wife, and she calmed me down. By morning I was fine—it was all nerves.

I knew I was to meet Kottas at an assigned time, but I hadn't thought about exactly where that would be, so, well ahead of the specified hour, I walked to the stables. From the barn, there stretched a small underpass, and the horses were literally led under it, across a small street into the indoor arena, which was on the other side. There, only a few feet from the street, were the famous doors that I had seen open in the films and photographs I had studied, allowing the horses and riders to enter the majestic school to the strains of Bizet, Mozart, and Chopin. There was no warm-up vestibule: one was on the street and then one was in the ring.

I was standing under the dark bridge, thinking about what to do, when Klaus Krzisch, a Chief Rider at the School (and one of my favorite riders), walked through the door. There he was, standing in front of me, alone, in complete uniform: brown tails and hat. He looked at me. I must have appeared lost.

Krzisch asked if he could help me. I explained that I was supposed to meet Herr Kottas but (clearly) I was not sure where. Krzisch just said, "Follow me," and we stepped into the school and marched under what I could see was the seating area, behind the wall of the ring's kickboards. We strode past giant pipes and electrical lines. We were in the ancient labyrinth where the nerves and veins of the School were hidden. We walked until we came

to a beautiful office, which I could see was right off the main square of the town, logically positioned to welcome all visitors. Kottas was there, saw me with Krzisch, and knew the route we had taken to reach him. He was very poised, but I could see that his expression was aghast. He shook my hand, smiled, and said, "Next time, please come through the front door."

### *Corps de Ballet*

We exchanged pleasantries, and Kottas took me to the Emperor's Box. Only a few other people were there; it was obvious that we were special guests. Throughout the morning, different riders visited the box and had a word with one guest or another.

It was like a dream. I could see everything perfectly in the arena before me, and it didn't take long for me to realize that everything I had read about the Spanish Riding School of Vienna was real. There was no disconnect: it was consistently the highest level of dressage I had ever seen, and yet it was in real life. Young horses acted out or clamored up the kickboards or bolted into the middle of the arena, yet no one got upset. It was as if the ritual, the tradition, the knowledge of the system was larger than any individual.

Early on, I saw horses with different personalities, and of course the riders had different personalities, yet the system was so strong that it produced a cohesive group. When the riders passed quickly, I could spy almost no difference in leg position, like a great *corps de ballet*. It would seem a soloist could appear from anywhere. The whole was greater than the sum of its parts. I think that is what the choreography of the quadrille was really

about: controlling one's ego, not standing out, good or bad. Then, the group could produce something that rose above individual achievement. It seemed the opposite of competition where one person tried to win. Maybe it was something in the Viennese water, or in the choirs, and orchestras—even the people out, drinking in bars, doing things together. The artistic standard was high at the Spanish Riding School and so was the expectation.

*The Human Side*

For the next few days, I shadowed Kottas. After the morning sessions at the School, I drove with him out to his private stable and watched the training there. It was interesting to see in real time just how successfully the classical principles of the Spanish Riding School could “fit into modern clothes” and work with different breeds of horses and even competitive dressage. For Kottas, this transition didn't seem to be anything unusual at all; in fact, it was more the opposite. His attitude seemed to ask how a person could think he would be successful at dressage *without* a base in these classical principles.

Kottas had a reputation that he could be sharp when teaching, but I found none of that. He was gracious and treated me like a member of the family. We stopped at his mother's house on the way out of Vienna; I met his neighbor, and had cups of coffee at his house. In the evening, when the work was done, he made sure I had a train ticket and ride back to the city. One night, he and his wife and son and I had dinner and went bowling.

On my last day, there was an early Sunday performance at the School, and Kottas explained that he had to leave promptly