



Dressage and Ballet.

by Gay Weaver, reprinted from Dressage Letters July 1972

Ballet and dressage are often compared to one another and indeed both emerged from the same sources, the Italian and French courts of the 16th and 17th centuries. One such comparison is made with the pas de deux, one of several terms that still exist in both disciplines, meaning a series of movements for two people.



In ballet the pas de deux has undergone radical changes, as has all ballet, since the 16th century. Dressage, being more conservative, has altered less. If, then, we wish to directly compare this form in both disciplines, we must speak of ballet as it existed three or four centuries ago.

At that time equestrian ballets and ballets danced by members of the court were very much alike. They were offered at the lavish entertainments provided for important occasions and like

the great formal gardens of the villas and chateaux, consisted of many series of symmetrical patterns.

The pas de deux would simply have been a scaled down version of this essential pattern making and it would have been executed by personages of high rank such as the king and queen (in case of dance ballets) or by the heads of the royal riding school.

In these patterns the two dancers or riders moved like mirror images of one another, each performing the given steps on the opposite hand. Since all patterns were symmetrical with the axis running the length of the performing area, at no time could both partners be on the same side of the this central line. Today the pas de deux in dressage must be executed in exactly this manner, although the form in ballet is now much less rigid.

During the 16th and 17th centuries the audience for both danced and equestrian ballets sat above and on three or four sides of an arena, so they could easily appreciate the moving designs that were constantly changed visually and dynamically below them.

Today the major similarities between the ballet and dressage pas de deux lie in their performance. In both kinds the partners must have complete understanding and agreement on the rhythmic and spatial dynamics of the movements they are going to execute, long before they reach the actual performance. For there they are each totally dependent on the other and misjudgment or error on the part of one will become immediately apparent, often to a disastrous degree.

In the ballet and dressage pas de deux alike – the welding together of various movements, each with its own special quality, into a smoothly integrated whole is part of what gives a performance brilliance. The pas de deux, as well as the dressage test, is like a dance. It is a unity and it must be executed as such or it becomes stilted. Yet at the same time no part must be slighted. Each must be given its due but must flow into the next.

From a choreographic standpoint, both should, of course, build toward a dramatic climax, with the most spectacular steps coming toward the end rather than at the beginning of the pas de deux. Although dressage is far more restricted than ballet the choreography produced for it should be as inventive as possible and should include forms of the walk, trot and canter.

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Finally, because ballet is performed and because it is a virtuoso discipline, whatever is executed must look simple. If it appears difficult, one has not thoroughly mastered the technique. When Fonteyn and Nureyev do a particularly stunning lift, we recognize its difficulty, but we do not see the immense effort it takes to execute it.

Again, in dressage the same idea is true. The riders and their horses should seem to be doing nothing but moving harmoniously and easily with each other. At the same time, however, this ease must be combined with great elan in the execution of each step.

When speaking of the dressage and ballet pas de deux, it must be remembered that relationships between such specific forms are not as strong as those that exist between the two disciplines in general.

The most important relationships between ballet and dressage stem from the fact that both are based on a technical development that dates from the same 16th century sources. The technical knowledge that we possess today is the result of at least four centuries of experiment and the distillation of those experiments into sound principles. Systematic training according to these principles is the basis of both disciplines and in dressage as in ballet, to rush or neglect that training anywhere along the line will make more difficult movements impossible to execute correctly.

The performance principles considered above in terms of the pas de deux naturally apply to all of dressage and ballet, as they do to other disciplines which demand great physical skill and expressive performance such as figure skating. However, again what in the last analysis brings ballet and dressage together is their common aristocratic background, which endows both with a special dignity and restraint.