

Musica universalis

Flying cross country, my seatmate—a stranger—asked me why I do this. “Horses” he meant. He was a proper sort of fellow. Wore a suit, even in coach. Buried himself for hours in his work, scribbling notes in margins and referring endlessly to documents on his laptop. But during the second beverage service, we struck up a halting conversation, and he really did want to know. Clearly his life’s path was taking him to a very different place than mine, and mine—curiously to him--seemed to be one I chose voluntarily.

“Because it’s fun,” seemed too superficial. “Because it’s making me rich,” was too overtly a falsehood. So, WHY?

The journey, not the destination? Yawn. That’s so trite. But yesterday my daily work conspired to remind me of the answer. The lesson I was teaching was pretty ordinary by some standards—a lower level horse, his adult novice rider learning what it means to become an active partner and to have her horse on the aids. I said nothing during the hour that hadn’t been said a zillion times before by instructors past and present all over the world. But a few of those words made a mammoth difference in how the horse became. Focused. Connected. Comporting himself with a way of going that, while surely not magical, was pleasant, coherent. And *Right*.

Its “rightness” wasn’t because it conformed to a diagram in the rulebook (although it did). Its rightness rang like a clear note does in frigid, still air. Or when you hit a ball on the sweet spot (No, Alexandra, not *that* sweet spot) and the totality of the sound, the feel, the arc speaks for itself.

Like a perfectly spherical gazing globe, there was a completeness. I’m reminded of that medieval notion called the Music of the Spheres--an astronomical, religious, mathematical construct which sought to explain the geometrical rationality and rightness of the heavens. Turned out in that case, they were wrong, but it made those who cared feel better till another answer came along.

Perhaps you’ve noticed: rational outcomes and predictability are qualities of which our entropic twenty-first century world is in short supply. Finding a corner of it where cause and effect still prevail and where comfort, order, and tranquility are their own rewards is reason enough for me to pursue dressage. Like listening to Beethoven’s Fifth, you know how it always comes out even before it does. And yet, the fact that it progresses the same way each time to its majestic conclusion heightens—rather than diminishing—the moment.

Real dressage when it sculpts a horse into coherence and beauty provides that same intellectual and visceral kind of affirmation for me. Even knowing the outcome, it is always a great relief that logic remains in the world I inhabit.