



# Classical Horse Training

*Combining art with science to achieve balance and harmony*



## PIROUETTE

*'to whirl about for lightness'*

# *MANUAL*

## **Foreword**

This document is the result of many years of research and personal experience world-wide. I sincerely hope that it will be useful to your personal learning experience and contribute to your personal training and development. This document goes together with the video assigned to you in the Online Support Program. Make sure to first watch the video and use the manual as an additional learning tool. I wish you a lot of fun and lightbulb moments diving into these materials.

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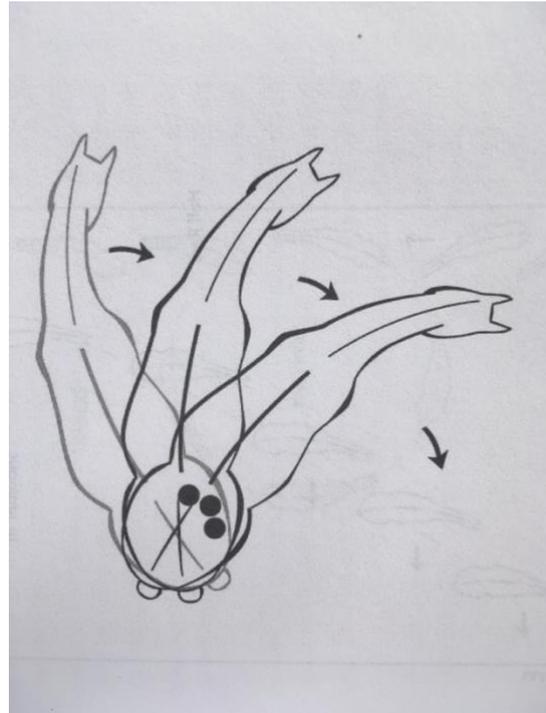
## **Disclaimer**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The pirouette is another lateral exercise used to prepare the horses' physique and mental processing for the athletic demand of performance. The word pirouette is a French term for the ballet reference 'to whirl about' and can be seen as a shoulder turn around the hind quarters in the smallest possible circle. In the words of Francois Robinchon de La Guérinière:

*"A pirouette is no more than a volte within the horse's length without changing place; the haunches remain in the centre and the shoulders make the circle".*



If performed correctly, the pirouette shows increased engagement of the hind quarters – particularly the inside hind limb - , freedom of the shoulders and enhancing true collection.

As with all lateral movements, the essence of the exercise is about correct lateral bending coupled with axial rotation. An ideal pirouette is a two-track forwards-sideways direction in which the horse turns its front end turns a larger circle around its hind end. During the pirouette, both front limbs and the outside hind limb travel around the inside hind limb –The horse is bended towards the direction of travel should turn smoothly in self-carriage, maintaining the cadence and sequence of the footfalls of the gait and enhance the collection.

The pirouette is often used interchangeably with the term 'turn on the haunches'. However, this is not quite correct. A turn on the haunches-in is different from a pirouette in two ways:

1. It is asked for in a slowed medium walk instead of a collected walk
2. The hind limbs travels on a wider circle then what is required in a pirouette in which the inside hind limb lifts and drops in – almost - the same footprint.

Furthermore, the pirouette is often explained as the smallest possible circle in haunches-in or Renvers. This description is also not fully accurate as it is an important point to remember that in a pirouette, the forehand is being asked to come around the hind quarters. Because the pirouette still requires inside bend, it is therefore that I always consider the pirouette as a combination of the shoulder-in and haunches-in on the circle.

The pirouette can be performed both on the ground and ridden on circles, corners and straight lines in all gaits. In walk, the pirouette is done in the closest angle possible. Due the natural rigidity of the trot I do not recommend regular trot pirouettes from a biomechanical perspective. However, a pirouette in piaffe can be useful to enhance the freedom of the shoulders in this collected trot. But even so, it is important to remember to ask less bending than in the walk. When performed in canter, a full pirouette should take 6-8 stride in a range that resembles the total length of the horse.

For the purpose of this manual I will focus on the work pirouette in walk as this will build up to the more complicated and challenging versions in piaffe and canter later on.

Finally, if the pirouette is executed correctly it is also very suited for rehabilitation purposes. However, a note must be made that because this a highly advanced move that the horse should not be asked to perform the exercises in early stages of rehabilitation or when having too poor proprioception.

## VARIATON

Several variations exist varying from  $\frac{1}{4}$  till a complete pirouette:

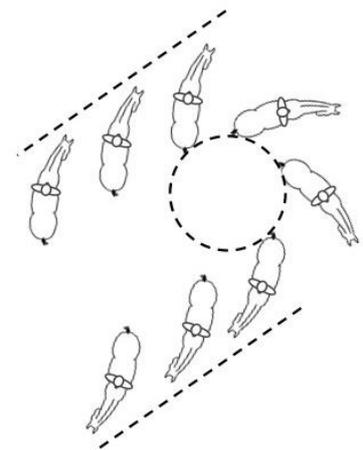
- The  $\frac{1}{4}$  pirouette describes a quarter volte which resembles to a regular 90 degrees turn. It is often performed using the square which consists of 4  $\frac{1}{4}$  pirouettes and thus a full pirouette in 4 phases.

The exercise should be performed in collected walk.

- $\frac{1}{2}$  pirouette describes a half-volte in once place within the horse's length in an angle of 180 degrees. It is a type of change of hand which is done by turning a horse from head to tail with the haunches remaining in the same place.

The  $\frac{1}{2}$  pirouette is often combined with a half pass, see illustration on the right.

- A full pirouette consists of a complete 360 degrees turn in which the inside hind limb lifts and drops in almost the same spot.



Furthermore, the pirouette can be used in **combination with a renvers, half pass, squares and shoulder-in / travers transitions on the circle.**

**It is always recommended to practice and play with all variations.**

## HISTORY

The use of voltes have been employed since the early age of dressage. From a historical perspective there were two types of circles – or volts:

1. Those in use for the exercise of war
2. Those practiced for pleasure and art in school

From a military perspective, the pirouette is a combat movement used for prompt turning to avoid being taken by surprise, to anticipate the enemy, to avoid his attack, or to attack him more diligently. Mastering the pirouette was thus very important to survive in battle. Those practised for pleasure and art in school served for beauty and were thus mainly performed in canter to ensure an eye-catching performance. For example, **Antoine de**



**Pluvinel** choreographed an entire equestrian ballet – Le Ballet a Cheval – commissioned by Maria de Medici in 1612 for the engagement of her son, - King Louis XIII, to Anne of Austria, - Princess of Spain. The dancing choreography consisted of many zigzag half passes, canter pirouettes, triangle and circle carousel formations. Apparently 200.000 people attended and Maria de Medici liked it so well that she had the performance repeated a week later for the aristocracy in the courtyard of the Louvre. This is only to state that since early ages, the pirouette has been celebrated as a movement of fine beauty and artistry.

*Picture adapted from Xenophon press displaying a canter pirouette to the left. There are hardly any historic materials on the walk pirouette.*

The old masters already recognized though that a good canter pirouette is difficult to achieve and must be prepared through the walk pirouette. **Francois Robinchon de La Guérinière wrote:** *“There are few horses who can do several pirouettes in a row of equal size – which is the beauty of this air – because few horses have the qualities needed for this exercise. These qualities are being very free in the shoulders and being very secure on the haunches (...) Before a horse is activated at the canter in the pirouettes, he must be made to do some half pirouettes at the walk in each direction – sometimes in one places, sometimes in another – and, to the extent that he obeys without problems the rider should collect him in the passage<sup>1</sup> and ask him for entire pirouettes so that – without disturbing the haunches – the head and the shoulders will be, upon finishing the pirouette, in the spot where they began. In this way, one will soon be able to easily do them at the canter”.*

**Gustav Steinbrecht** emphasized the importance of a carrying inside hind limb by stating that the pirouette can *“only be performed on the inside hind leg which, the tighter the turns become, must carry the load more on its own, while the other three legs, particularly the outside hind leg, only perform the role of supporting the load for short instances and returning it again and again to the inside hind leg. It is therefore obvious that only the perfected flexibility of the inside hind leg, connected with an elasticity which is able to push off the weight of horse and rider elastically at any time, enable the horse to perform such turns”.*

In line with de La Guérinière he recognized that not all horses are natural talents for the pirouette. Stiffer horses will be more likely to drift out sideways and losing the proper coordination. Therefore, this type of horse – which is what we mostly work with today - is even more dependent on correct rider aids. He said *“ With less talented horses one will have to be satisfied to reduce the size of the circle only to the extent that the inside hind leg described the smallest possible circle. In this connection it should also be pointed out that the smaller the circles becomes, the horse will have more of a tendency to escape by its*

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Guérinière thus first performed the pirouette in passage before he would try for canter pirouette. This for sure is some food for thought about modern-day approaches.

*hindquarters falling out and that therefore the rider's outside leg, rein and seat bone must control the outside hind leg that much more while his inside leg and seat bone maintain forward movement."*

**Nuno Oliveira** states that in the horse must therefore be able to collect in the walk so that the inside hind limb is properly prepared for the task. So rather than trying to achieve collection as a result from the exercise, the horse must already be able to collect to some extent to actually perform a pirouette. This shows the importance of correct lateral work, especially the shoulder-in as preparatory exercises to set the horse up for success.

Finally, it should also be noted that some great horsemen warned against performing too many walk pirouette. **Miguel de Lancastre e Tavora** rightfully pointed out that "the rider should not do too much work in the walk pirouette, because the walk doesn't have suspension, nor much impulsion. Too much walk pirouette risks losing the activity of the inside hind leg."

So in summary, all classical masters used the walk pirouette as a preparatory exercise for the more elevated canter pirouette. Keeping that essence in mind is important to not overwork you horse and using it as a means to an end rather as being fixed on the exercise itself.

## STRAIGHTNESS

Because the exercise is closely associated to all other lateral exercises previously explained in this program it enhances straightness, balance, and self-carriage.

However, It is important to not only use the pirouette to straighten and supple our horse, but again also capitalize its relationship with the previous lateral exercises so that you can keep essence in mind. Because the front end and outside hind limb travel around the inside hind limb, this leg will always carry most weight. It is thus very important that the horse has learn to bend properly through its joints through the exercise shoulder-in. The haunches-in is necessary to ensure the outside hind limb doesn't drift away but carries weight and lift the inside shoulder so that the horse is not falling through the movement. Therefore, any problems in the half pass could be restored through refining the basic laterals.

## PREPARATION

The pirouette requires adequate preparation of its basic building blocks of shoulder-in and haunches-in and half pass as well as being able to collect to a certain degree. Please work on those lateral movements first prior to starting this exercise.

To start teaching the pirouette, the horses should be able to perform the preparatory exercises easily without any tension, loss of shape, suppleness and rhythm / cadence.

Doing plenty of transitions between shoulder-in and travers on the carré and regular volte will help both you and the horse to set you up for success.

Furthermore, it is really important to master your own body so that you are able to properly guide the horse into a correct pirouette.

## STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS

The basic aids include inner intention, body posture, voice, rein and whip aids.

### GROUNDWORK – ONE REIN (CAVESSON)

1. There are several ways to prepare the horse optimally in the groundwork:
  - My preferred technique is to start moving on a square or carré volte. In the beginning, it is useful to outline the squares with either poles or cones to make sure you're not losing your direction of travel.

From there, ask a haunches-in in every corner of the square which brings the horse into a 90 degree turn which classifies as a  $\frac{1}{4}$  pirouette . After the first turn, go straight again and repeat in the next turn. This way, after completing a full square you will have made 4  $\frac{1}{4}$  pirouettes and thus a full one in 4 phases.



- A second technique could be to introduce the pirouette from the half pass. Gently ask the horse to travel onto the diagonal from the short side into the half pass. After a few strides, make a slight half halt and collect your horse a bit more.

Change the direction of travel into a circle and advance to a ½ pirouette after which you return to the half pass.

- A third technique is to initiate the pirouette through a renvers turn and then changing the rein – without change the bend – and enter a circle. Choose its size depending on what the horse can manage.
  - A final technique is to ask a haunches-in on a regular circle and slowly closing the circle in size. Again, it is very important to not make the circle smaller than the horse can manage. As soon as any tension arises or the horse loses shape than immediately go forward and out of the movement again.
1. No matter what technique you use, make sure that in the beginning your reward every good try and ask for a few steps only so that the horse can gradually strengthen. So Enjoy the process and don't tire the horse too much 😊

#### **WORK IN HAND & LONG-REIGNING – TWO REINS (CAVESSON OR BRIDLE)**

1. To teach the exercise with two reins you can apply almost the same techniques when working with one rein. The difference is realizing that you're on the outside and thus ask the horse away from you instead towards.
2. For example: when teaching from the square, you are positioned to the outside or the horse instead, asking the haunches-in away from you – it is not a renvers as the haunches-in still move away from the 'wall'. The same applies when you teach the pirouette from the half pass or an actual renvers.
3. Enjoy the process and don't tire the horse too much 😊

#### **RIDING – TWO REINS & SEAT (CAVESSON OR BRIDLE)**

Once the horse can perform the pirouette on the ground, you can also ask it ridden. When performed ridden, the aids of the seat are added to those of intention, body posture and reins. The aids are the same as during lateral bend and riding in which the most important element is to remain vertically balance over the seat bones. To teach the pirouette ridden:

1. Prepare the horse the same way as explained in the groundwork.

2. Stay vertical over your seat bones. Use the same aids as explained for lateral bending and travers.
3. Assist with half halts if needed to collect the horse a bit more.
4. Make sure to move with your shoulders and seat towards the direction of travel and not away from it.
5. Enjoy the process and don't tire the horse too much 😊



## CHALLENGES & TROUBLESHOOTING

### 1. Losing the shoulders

The first and foremost mistake I have observed throughout the years is that the horse loses the shoulders to turn – and thus the correct bending. The outside front limb should have the freedom to cross over so make sure that you are not limiting the movement with the outside rein. Restore if needed by travelling out of the movement and asking for a shoulder-fore and shoulder-in. As soon as the shoulders turn inwards again, try again.

If the horse falls onto the inside shoulder, you will have to restore the forward with your inside lower leg and straighten up before trying again. You can also use a bit more of haunches-in cue until the inside front is lifted. Then go back to a more shoulder-in position and try again.

## 2. Drifting of the outside hind limb

This usually happens when the horse is not strong enough to perform the exercise on the angle asked. To correct, restore the forward and try again on a bigger angle and gradually decrease again to find the maximum engagement the horse can handle.

The haunches-in cue can be used to connect the outside hind limb after which the leading of the shoulders needs to be established again.



## 3. Overbending

Again, this also induces inverted rotations and all problems thereof. If you're working on the ground with one rein, correct this issue by giving forwards on the rein and gently push the nose back in front of the sternum will timing the movement of the outside shoulder to come your way. You can also use a vertical whip aid over to the outside shoulder. When working with two reins and ridden, give forward on the inside rein while opening slightly on the outside to invite the horse to place its head/neck back in the correct position. Be careful not to use any weight displacements as leaning to the outside of the direction of movement will again only make the problems worse.

## 4. Rushing

Another common mistake is that horse rushes into the pirouette and starts to spin. The spinning is damaging the joints and usually happens when the horse isn't prepared properly and keeps the hind limbs straight instead of bended. When this happens, immediately travel out of the movement forward and work on a basic collection through shortening a few strides and then lengthen again as well as working on the shoulder-in/ haunches-in separately again

## 5. Getting stuck

Opposite to the previous challenges, in the beginning a horse might get 'stuck' and simply stops. This often happens when the horse hasn't learned to keep a steady rhythm and has been trained to slow down instead of collecting properly. When this happens you have to go back to your building blocks in which you make sure that the horse is not just slowing down, but remains activated and steps forward towards the point of mass so it learns to lower the haunches-in. Remember, collection is maximum power. It is not slowing down.

## 6. Loss of gait purity

The walk stride has to consist of four beats. Pivoting around one hind leg without lifting is not a correct moment. In fact, this twisting action can actually damage the horse's joints.

When performed in canter, the gait actually is meant to remain a three-beat action with a moment of suspension. However, hardly any horse is able to maintain this action and the movement often degenerates into a four-beat or lateral pattern.

Any loss of gait purity should be immediately recognized and corrected by travelling out of the movement and refining the basic building blocks first.

## 7. Blocking trainer/ rider

Finally, a most common mistake is that the trainer blocks the movement with incorrect rein and/or seat aids.

- If the inside rein is too strong, the horse is forced into inverted rotation. On the other hand, a limiting outside rein blocks the outside front limb to cross over.
- Common mistakes in the seat are leaning too much to the outside, tilting and leaning backwards with the shoulders, placing the outside leg too far back and forgetting about the inside leg.

To restore these problems go back to the basics of how to apply correct independent aids. Furthermore, it might help to think about 'chasing your enemy'. Imagine having a 'sword' inside your inside hand and that you want to hit your enemy that is travelling on the diagonal. Usually, this places your seat better in tune with the horse.

## 8. Fatigue

As mentioned before, Too much walk pirouette risks losing the activity of the inside hind leg. Therefore, make sure to combine this degree of collection with enough straight and forward.

For example: a forward straight trot after a couple of tries for pirouette.

## RELEVANT STRUCTURES

As the pirouette builds upon the basic building block of shoulder-in and travers the same structures will be activated with the only difference being the intensity of muscle activation.

For a more specific outline see the manual for shoulder-in and travers.

**THE END 😊**