

Shall We Dance? By Lynn Acton

Bronzz informed me early in our partnership that his mission in life was to teach me to have more fun. Since I have fun learning new things, obviously my mission was to make learning fun for Bronzz too. I sneak lots of training into the trail rides he loves, but it's harder to make arena work entertaining. Even with patterns, ground poles, and various games, the fact remained that Bronzz loved ring work like an outdoor person loves a desk job. Then we discovered music.

I had spent many winter evenings listening to music and sensing Bronzz's stride in the beat. Come spring I set my boom box ringside, and put on my favorite Enya CD, "Paint the Sky with Stars". Could I possibly teach Bronzz to move with the beat, I wondered? Ha! He immediately walked, trotted, and cantered in time to the music, adjusting his pace to match the beat. He was energized and focused, with an extra spring in his step. He was having fun!

The music not only encouraged Bronzz to work harder, it proved to be a valuable teaching tool. Following the beat he learned to maintain a steady, rhythmic stride, then to lengthen and shorten his stride, even on the lunge line. "Clucking" to him normally means speed up, but he couldn't do that and stay with the music, so he lengthened his stride. Saying "eeeasy" normally means slow down; instead he shortened and elevated his stride. He started to learn a collected canter when I played music that was just slightly too slow; he *had* to use his hind end to balance himself. His transitions improved because he knew I would ask for gait changes when the music changed. Music also helped me "tune in", and brought to mind advice from a Tai Chi master, "Once with focus is worth 50 times mindlessly."

Meanwhile, fearing that Bronzz would get bored, I tried other music, and discovered that I had accidentally hit the jackpot with that first Enya CD. Most of the songs on that CD match either his trot or canter stride, and he likes them. Many other pieces of music we tried were flops. Too fast, too slow, not a strong enough beat, or he just didn't like them. A too-too slow song had him tiptoeing in slow motion. *Stars and Stripes Forever*, too fast, had him trotting double time like a park horse in fast forward. Play a waltz or minuet and he says, "Wake me up when it's over." But once we find something he likes, he never gets tired of it.

Playing with music led to making up routines to ride to, which proved to be far more fun than the dressage tests we were supposed to be practicing. Thus for our first dressage show I planned a musical freestyle-- with

tremendous help from instructor and friends! So powerful was the influence of the music that we earned *better* scores on our First Level Musical Freestyle than on Training Level Test 4 which is technically less difficult.

Music is not just for dressage. Most horses take to it just as Bronzz did, and you can have fun with it whether you ride, lunge, or dance right along with your horse. Here are some tips to get you started.

Music selection is crucial. You and your horse must both love your choice, or it's just a distraction. It must have a definite, steady beat, like Ravel's *Bolero*, and match your horse's stride at the gait you plan to use it. You can play with your horse using any music that feels like your horse's rhythm, or you can time your horse's stride at each gait with a metronome and match the beats per minute to music you like. If your horse tends to be sluggish, go for something lively such as a march. For a calming effect, use slower, flowing music. You'll know when you find music your horse likes. The first time Sapphire heard the *Radetzky March*, she spontaneously broke into an animated trot. When we tried music that did not fit Shiloh's stride, she got nervous and confused and refused to move at all.

Introduce music judiciously. The first time Bronzz heard a glockenspiel he was so astonished he went straight up in the air like a cartoon.

Whether you use music for training or just for fun, it's easy to get caught up and work harder than your horse is in shape for, so be sure to include breaks or walk-tempo songs. Tight turns, collection, lengthening, and lateral work all stress joints. Before starting such advanced work, your horse should be fit, well balanced, and using her hind end to reduce stress on her body. That athletic balance, by the way, is the *real* goal of good dressage, and the reason that other disciplines use it for cross-training.

Once you've found great music, you might want to make up routines to go with it. Plan these in advance to reduce trial and error while riding. Count the number of strides it takes your horse to go a certain distance (the length of the arena, for example, or a 20 meter circle) at each gait. Then match this to the beats in each phrase of your music. Or you can use a stopwatch to time your horse's movements and the musical phrases. At dressage shows, musical freestyles must meet very specific requirements, (see below), but even if that is your long range goal, the best start is to have fun with music you and your horse love.

One day I left Bronzz saddled in the barn aisle while I went to the arena to set up the boom box. As our freestyle music started to play, Bronzz whinnied impatiently. "Hurry up, Mom! They're playing our song!"

Resources:

“You CAN Ride to Music!” Practical Horseman (Dec 2008). Music selection, including average beats per minute for walk, trot, and canter.

“Design to Win” Dressage Today (Feb 2009). Musical freestyle patterns.

www.equimusic.com lists songs by beats per minute.

www.usdf.org (U.S. Dressage Federation) Rules for musical freestyles.

www.usef.org (U.S. Equestrian Federation) Specific requirements for each level of freestyle are included in the *Dressage Test Book*.

www.ultimatedressage.com international dressage website with a musical freestyle forum.