

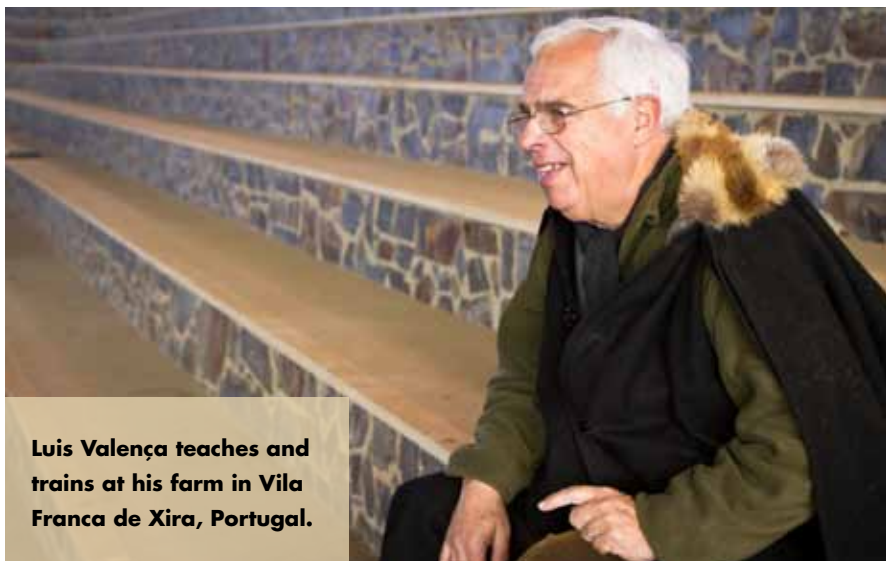
# HERITAGE & HEART

Portugal's revered dressage master Luis Valença tells stories of his life with horses.

*Interview and photos by Keron Psillas*

A swirl of activity is taking place at the *Centro Equestre de Lezíria Grande* (CELG) in Vila Franca de Xira, Portugal, about 18 miles north of Lisbon. This has been the home and center of operations for Mestre Luis Valença and his family for nearly 30 years. The CELG has become a mecca for students and aspiring professionals around the world who are interested in classical dressage in the baroque equestrian art. Mestre Valença is a repository of the teaching of Francois Baucher through Nuno Oliveira, and he is rightfully regarded as a treasure of knowledge, ability and finesse.

The entire Valença family is involved with horses. Wife Luisa has been his partner for more than four decades, and together with their three daughters, Luisa, Filipa and Sophia, they have taught many students and shared their love of the horses, especially the Lusitano, with people from all over the world.



**Luis Valença teaches and trains at his farm in Vila Franca de Xira, Portugal.**



**KERON PSILLAS:** Mestre Luis, will you give us your biography?

**LUIS VALENÇA:** My father was a Marine with no connection to the horses. But in 1955 and '56, my godfather had a riding hall in Lisbon, and during this time many people still used carriages. So my godfather, Fernando Ralão, prepared the carriage horses, riding horses, dressage horses, everything. He didn't have sons, so I began to go with him every day, beginning at age 3. He gave me the experience from the world of the horse. I got to go with him to see how he chose the horses to



**Valença is the master of dressage for “Apassionata” a long-running equestrian production in Europe.**

buy, how he chose a horse for bullfighting, for the carriages. He was a fantastic teacher. I learned about the culture of the horse in Portugal, how to ride in the hall, how to be with the horses, to understand them and respect each one as an individual.

In the second stage of my learning, I discovered competition, first from Mestre D. José Manuel da Cunha Menezes, the last *Picador Real* (instructor to the Portuguese royal family). He began to teach me when he was 87 years old until he died at 93. And then I was a student of Mestre Oliveira. The third stage is

now, the time of the performances. These began in the 1980s and continue today.

**KP:** In which ways were these stages of learning different?

**LV:** In the first two periods I lived with great passion. I learned to ride each day with passion and great love for what I was learning and for what the horses offered to me. It was a coincidence for me to begin to ride with Mestre Menezes. They told me “that man is from the time of General DeCarpentry, from the time of Baucher.”

At that time, the group of students

wanted to present an homage to Mestre Menezes. There was a horse that he had trained, who was 25 years old that was brought to the riding hall to see if someone could ride him in the show. This horse could do everything. Canter on the spot and backwards, all 35 movements that Baucher trained. So I watched every day. Then one day in conversation, Mr. Menezes asked me, “Do you ride?” I said, yes, and so he asked me to show him my horse Baron, a very nice chestnut horse. And so I rode a little. When I finished, he said to me (a very strict man with a monocle), “Come here. How old



**Valença's well-balanced Lusitano performs a levade for him at his school. Details are important. Even the carefully carved horse-head cane and the sleeve of a 17th century costume must be correct.**

are you?" I was 16 at the time. He said, "You have a good chance to succeed as a rider. All my life, I dreamed to have a horse like the one you have now at 16. You have a special horse and you ride him with sensitivity. And you ride the horse with whom?" I replied that I did not have a teacher. He said to me then: "If you want, then I will begin to teach you each day." And that was my connection to Mr. Menezes. It was so special because this man had something to do each day to give his life vitality. And for me, the opportunity to learn from him was so special—to have the knowledge, direct from Baucher, about the horse.

We created a great friendship. In the last year of his life, he was bedridden. But each day I went to his home. We had two chairs, one that we would put the bridle on and one for me to sit on and he would teach me how to ride the movements, how to touch with the reins, with the spur. He would touch

with his finger to show me the pressure, and he would tell me stories of his life. It was a very special time.

In that time, I came to know Mestre Oliveira. For me, he is the first man in the world of the horse, the finest master. Why? Because he lived with passion for the horse each day. He lived with a fire to learn, to experience what the horse had to teach us every single day.

**KP:** How did you meet Nuno Oliveira?

**LV:** Mestre Oliveira was married to a cousin of mine, but there was terrible jealousy at that time because my godfather had this riding hall in Lisbon. But Oliveira was preparing a performance and one day, Mr. Menezes said to me, "Today you don't have a lesson. We go to the riding hall in the palace instead. Nuno Oliveira has asked that I do some photos for the exposition." (Menezes and Miranda taught the King and the Prince. Miranda was also

Nuno's teacher.)

Several days after our meeting at the Royal Hall, he came to the riding hall in Lisbon to see me. He asked if I would ride the horse I had been riding with Mestre Menezes. I obliged, of course, and when I was finished, he said to me, "It's not bad, but in this moment, dressage is evolving. It is changing." He said it was good that I rode in the old way, understood the lessons of Baucher, but dressage was changing, and that it was a much bigger world than what I was learning. All the things from the great masters are good, if you know where to apply them, but dressage is bigger than just this teaching. I said that I would accept, but with the condition that while Mestre Menezes was still alive, each day I would have a lesson with him.

So I began that way with Nuno. I would have a lesson with him in the morning and then after lunch I would go to Mestre Menezes and study with

him. I spent many years with Nuno, and we became great friends. I am not a rich man, but blessed with many riches, all because of the horse.

Later in our lives together, Nuno told me this: Dressage is a bigger world now, more open, but after all this time and all the horses and experience, with this one horse (he was speaking of a very difficult, special Andalusian horse he was training), if Baucher had not existed, I could not train this horse.

You see, we must know our history, our heritage and have the knowledge of when to apply this special teaching. This, together with love and compassion for each horse, will create a rider with unusual tact and great ability.

**KP:** Mestre, in your stable I see horses of various ages. Tell me how you begin with a young horse.

**LV:** I begin with the young horses the same way I begin with any horse that arrives to my riding center, with the voice, then with the touch. Slowly. The young horses here in Portugal stay out in the field, alone, until they are 3 or 4. Then they come in and need to be treated with sensitivity to become used to humans. For the Lusitano, this does not take long, maybe a week, maybe two or three, but they arrive to the place where they enjoy the contact very quickly. So you will see me use my voice in various ways, higher and lower, to communicate different things.

This starts from the very first moment. When I can come in to feed him, I use my voice to let him know that all is well and we are friends. Then I will begin to touch him, with my hands, all over his body. This is for him to know that whenever I am with him it is always as a friend. Never against him and never in an aggressive way. This same voice and method of touch will carry through to the longeing and to the work in-hand as we begin the training, and then into riding or work-

ing with the long reins.

Watch as I begin to touch this baby. If I touch lightly, briskly, he will back away. But if I touch slowly, firmly, calmly, he will lean into me. In this way I begin to create trust and to create the bond and communication between us. There is a system of how you stand, where you stand, how you longe and the steps in the work in-hand, and of course, in riding, but always in the same way, the same intent of communication—always in the same feeling of calm and quiet and cooperation.

**KP:** And this is the same with a mature horse that is new to your center?

**LV:** Yes, because the reason we do this is to build trust and to create a way to communicate with each other. Many older horses have experienced things in their lives that sometimes are not so pleasant, but the horse has an amazing capacity for love and trust, so if we begin again in a calm and trusting manner, always respecting his comfort, then we can create a strong foundation.

**KP:** Is it easier to teach the horses or the riders while preparing for a show?

**LV:** It is easier to teach the horses a new choreography because they learn so easily and quickly. The riders are distracted and have difficulty remembering the patterns, but the horses, after they go two or three times, they remember. You need to have a particular psychology for the horses and for the boys [riders]. With the horses I know very well what to look for. For the boys, well, you have a different way with each to fix the problems.

It is important when you prepare a show that the horses go in relaxation, not in stress, and for the performers it is the same. For when you do something from the heart, you can't have people in stress or the horses in tension, it is not beautiful. You must have clarity and feeling for what you are doing. For



**Luis Valença's granddaughter, Ines Cancio, carries on the family's dressage training and Portuguese cultural traditions.**

me it is very easy because I love this life. When I choose the riders, I choose a little bit in this direction. For example, one rider may be technically very good. Then the next is not quite as good in his position or learning but he loves the horse with all his heart and he loves the life of being with the horse. This is the rider I will choose to perform. The art of the show comes

from the horse offering his special personality. So the rider must have a special tact to allow the horse to perform and offer his joy and spirit. In the equestrian art each horse can do the same presentation, but each horse will give something different. In my life I had a very special horse, Zagalo. We would play the music from Pavarotti for his performance in the shows and each time, there was something different, something a little bit special. It is a little contrary to competition where the focus is precision.

Here is one special story about Zagalo: In 1986 or '87, we went to Birmingham, England, to do a show. The opening number was with a bullfighter that I invited to join us. At the end of the performance, his horse fell down and died—a heart attack. The lights went down, a friend covered the horse and within one minute the horse has

gone. I said to my young daughter, Luisa, to take Zagalo and do what you feel, what you want. In that moment, my wife put on a record from Verdi, and Luisa and Zagalo went into the arena. As she rode, my daughter began to cry. Zagalo seemed to understand. Finally, he stopped and looked at the people, and they stood and applauded. The day after, I received 200 telegrams from the public telling me how moved they were by this performance. The horse transmitted to us all the feeling that is special from the Lusitano. It could have been a terrible disaster, and in one way, it was. But Zagalo showed us the connection and love that horses give us in a powerful way.

The art is what the horse transmits each time he works. This life is fantastic: You work and work but you work with satisfaction because the horse gives you these moments.

## FROM STUDENT TO MASTER

Luis Valença began as a student of Mestre Menezes, who was the last Picador Real and a contemporary of General DeCarpentry and Francois Baucher. Next he became a student of Nuno Oliveira during the late 1950s and '60s. In 1975, he taught and trained at the *Real Escuela Andaluza* in Jerez de la Frontera, Spain, where he performed and promoted the methods of traditional Portuguese riding. In 1977, he was invited to become a part of the then recently founded Portuguese School of Equestrian Art. From 1979 to 1997, he was a *Mestre Picador* with the school. From 1981 to 1983, he developed and built his *Centre Equestre de Leziria Grande* in Vila Franca de Xira located in the heart of horse breeding in Portugal and a center for equestrian cultural heritage. In 2003, during his tenure as president of the 15th International Festival of the Lusitano, he was made an Honorary Life-long Member of the Portuguese School of the Equestrian Art. From 2002 to the present, Valença has been Technical Director for what is now known as "Apassionata," a long-running European equestrian production, and his dressage students have been its cornerstone.

**KP:** How do you communicate your passion, or do you see this passion present already in the students that come?

**LV:** Yes, I do see it. For instance, right now in the center we have a little boy with severe dyslexia, and his mother comes to me and says that he thinks all the time about horses. So now, after an evaluation, the school tells him that he should come here for two days each week and not go to school on these days. Because it helps him to learn, to stay calm in school as he has the horses to look forward to. With each student that comes here, I give the instructions and they each have their jobs. But after, I give them freedom because each will develop his own specialty.

Because I had so many teachers that offered me their personal knowledge, their teaching, but always in this way: here is the knowledge and then the free-

dom to develop. I am not talking about offering Baucher and then giving freedom. No. I am talking about giving the basics and then giving them freedom. I watch and perhaps correct a little here and there, but this way I learn about the student. And we go together in this manner, progressively. Each rider will receive what they want and as much as they want. Some stay longer, some shorter, but each has the freedom to develop their special interests with the horse.

For example, I have many students, known in the world. They stayed here with me and learned in this manner. Olympian Carlos Pinto, Nuno Palma Santes and other riders come regularly from the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art and from all around the world. Here they learn the basics of classical horsemanship. After, if you want to ride dressage, then you can go to the compe-

tion world. Or perhaps you enjoy the Equestrian Art, so you can go then to a spectacle in France or England or the United States.

In 2003, during the International Lusitano Exposition in Lisbon, they did an homage to me. There were 57 former students there from all over the world. Can you imagine? I began to look and see that this one is very good in dressage, that one is a jumping champion, that one is an artist. Portuguese riders, some Spanish, some French, Dutch, English, American—people from many years at the school. It was a moment of tremendous gratification. For me, it was a great satisfaction as I didn't force anyone to take the knowledge. Each received it in his or her way and then created a life with their horses—a life that they are passionate about. This to me is beautiful! This is what our horses offer to us. 🐾

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