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Bare Essentials: passo patinato & passo balestra - affondo

When I first learned fencing, I learned there were two ways of advancing and lunging, thus making an attack. They were called the *patinando* and the *balestra*. Since then, I've come to realize that many people believe different things about what these words can be used for. In the end - thanks to the help of Maître Aldo Cuomo: vice-president of the Italian national academy of fencing - I've come to realize *patinando* isn't the favored word in Italian! In combination with the step, you're not supposed to use it.

What then does exist? And what's the use?

Although the word *balestra* is in use, in case of *patinando* the proper word is *patinato*. The *patinato* is used for the advance, with or without a lunge. It's then called the *passo patinato*, where *passo* means step, not advance. The *balestra* only exists with an advance-lunge. And the Italian word for the lunge is *affondo*.

Patinato and *balestra* as words only serve as a metaphor. But what do they mean?

Patinato is a conjugation of the Italian verb *patinare*. The metaphor isn't entirely clear. If I translate it correctly, it means you add a layer to a metal through an oxidation process. According to Maître A. Cuomo, it says in Italian literature that it is a particularly slow step made in two times, without the feet beating the ground, almost crawling on the platform.

So much for my rattling step lunge, that I by my own mistake would have linked to the above terminology. Not that it isn't any use. I'm just better off calling it rattling in English, or *ratelend* in Dutch.

He continues to note that the *passo patinato - affondo* (*patinato* advance lunge) is executed in three times. Two for the steps, and one for the lunge. Please note that conventionally, from a jury's point of view, the entire step lunge should be counted as a single fencing time. So the three beat division, without making audible beats, is a Maître's point of view and not the point of view of the jury president.

Balestra then means 'crossbow'. Here, you tighten the muscles in your step forward by executing the step as a small jump [edit: with both feet landing at the same time]. Than lunge like you would shoot an arrow. The word *balestra* can be used by itself, but it will always mean *passo balestra - affondo*.

Maître A. Cuomo also notes it is used to speed up the lunge, the whole attack executed in two times, making the jump almost as if with two feet in place to charge your legs using your weight. Once again, the jury president will count the whole attack as one fencing time.

So far the explanations as I've received them by Maître A. Cuomo. With thanks.

Knowing these metaphors, the one question that comes to mind than is, “When do you use either of them?”

The answer lies in the preparation. If you try to hit someone without a preparation, you won't be able to catch your opponent off-guard through your rhythm.

A beginner may be overwhelmed by the marching character of the *passo patinato - affondo* or the speed of the *balestra*, but marching or speed don't necessarily mean anything on the professional level. Fencing is the one sport where a keen eye in combination with reading the intentions of your opponent can outdo an aggressive or speedy opponent anytime. Thus women can beat men.

What can you do in a proper step-lunge attack?

Alter the rhythm of the feet, by opting for the *passo patinato* or *passo balestra* first, then switching to the other. Or add a feint or two. Or both.

One thing you can do is make a direct attack by *passo patinato - affondo*, allow yourself to be parried, make distance before the riposte (the counter-thrust after the parry) can hit and then attack by *balestra* [edit: after one second worth of pause]. The opponent will wait for the third count, but will actually be hit on the second.

Something else is to start with a direct attack by *balestra*. Again, you allow yourself to be parried and retreat before the riposte lands. That's an attack in two counts. Now you continue with the *passo patinato - affondo*. Think for a second what you need to change!

In case of this alteration, you need to attack with a feint-disengage. You will be parried on the two, so you will feint on the one, disengage on the two, and hit on the three in the opposite line. The *passo patinato* will give you some 'leisure' time to do this.

The opponent may take parries at different times and in different combinations, so these are only examples. Why wouldn't your opponent parry a second parry on the three? When that happens, you have to disengage once more in the lunge. But maybe your opponent takes an early parry on the one. Then what? Or maybe you just disengage in the lunge of another *balestra*?

Whether you use a *passo patinato* or *passo balestra - affondo* variation is dependent, as all fencing actions, on three things. What just happened, if anything did. What you expect to happen now. What you expect to happen after this fencing action, if more can still follow.

Should you change the rhythm of your feet? Or only of your hand by adding or removing feints? Or both? This depends on how you expect your opponent will respond, based on the before, now, and after. Even with these minor changes in how you execute your step lunge, the options are myriad. And there are many more ways of varying your actions.

Have you thought about letting the attack fall short? Or only attacking with a single step? The beginning of the attack should also be parried, so a step, that is accompanied by the stretching of the arm, should also be counted as an attack.

One thing I ask you to note, that one should note for fencing as much as for Hollywood or any other art, is that nobody knows anything [edit: which I'm yanking out of context, misquoting William Goldman]. Every fencing master knows better than the other. In the end, it isn't about what works for them, but what works for you. (Again, my thanks to Maître A. Cuomo, who does know everything. [edit: 😊])

Figure out your own terminology, in your own language. But if you choose to use Italian, or French, use it the way you should. Within the proper language, the terminology does make sense.