



The Art and the Science

An introduction to rapier techniques of Salvator Fabris

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Dijon Notes: An introduction to the rapier treatise of Salvator Fabris

The aim of these notes and the accompanying workshop is to give you an introduction to the rapier treatise of Salvator Fabris: *Lo Schermo, overo Scienza d'Arme*. However, rather than present a series of isolated techniques, I want to give you an impression of some of the principles followed by Fabris. Indeed, the techniques in *Lo Schermo* should not be seen as being fixed or immutable, rather they should be seen as illustrating the core principles of Fabris' fencing system. Thus the techniques must be adapted by the student to suit their current situation, as long as the student applies the rules of the art consistently.

In particular, the workshop is designed to show you different ways of gaining or taking a tempo.

If you are unfamiliar with the concept, tempo means time. A tempo is the amount of time required to complete a fencing action and also the opportunity you give to your opponent while performing an action within measure. (Leoni: Art of Dueling p287) Your aim in a fight is to take the tempo (take advantage of the opportunity) when it arises, without giving away a tempo yourself.

It should be noted that while some of the concepts are quite easy to describe, they may take a lot of practise to execute effectively. In particular, a number of the techniques require very precise timing or blade actions and the ability to adapt quickly to a constantly changing situation. You must therefore drill the basic techniques until they are fluid and natural, before trying to use them to achieve some of the more advanced goals described later. However, I think it is useful for you to be aware of these advanced concepts, so you can see how the system works as a whole.

In addition, I have decided to give the workshop a "goal". (A learning outcome in educational parlance.) This is something to aim towards that, if you can complete it by the end of the lesson, you will know that you have grasped the basic concepts being presented.

In this lesson our goal is a partnered form or play, that is to say a fixed sequence of movements performed with an opponent, designed to test your execution of the techniques being studied. While this is not a teaching technique described by Fabris in his treatise, it is seen in earlier sidesword manuals and I find it to be quite effective.

These notes also contain a selection of techniques that we may or may not get time to cover in the workshop. They are included to give you a flavour of the variety of techniques found in Fabris' treatise.

Part I: Guards and body posture

The purpose of a guard is to be in a position from which you can defend yourself easily, move easily and attack your opponent quickly when the opportunity arises. It is a defensive state of readiness. To meet these aims the Fabris guards have the following characteristics:

The step is very short and the hips are pulled back, with the body bent forwards. This means that it is very difficult for your opponent to reach any part of your body, other than your head. This gives you a much smaller area to defend. Bending the body forwards also means you have to move less when you attack, making you thrust quicker and more accurate. The weight is over the back foot so that you can move your front foot quickly to attack.

Training note: the lower you bend, the less of a target you will present, however, if you bend too far you will not be able to move quickly. Fabris is quite clear (*Art of Dueling*, p28) that you should not bend further than is comfortable, otherwise you will lose the benefits of the stance. (But, with practice, you will be able to bend further.)

In most guards the sword is held extended so that the hilt can cover the head. Your thrusts will also be quicker and more accurate if your sword is already extended. But the arm should not be tense, as this will slow down your movements.



Prima



Seconda



Terza



Quarta



Terza, with a fairly mild bend

Training note: while standing in guard it is important to be “poised” for action. The muscles must not be tense, but nor should you be completely relaxed. Ensure that once you have started an exercise you maintain an alert state – avoid making a habit of “over relaxing” between techniques.

As a general rule, terza is one of the most useful guards and the one we will use throughout the workshop.

Part II: Selected techniques

In each technique, the agent will offer the patient a different tempo. From these techniques you should start to understand what constitutes a good tempo to take and how to take it, and also what is not a good tempo.

Training note: your first goal should be to avoid giving your opponent a tempo. Your second goal is to take the tempo when it arises. Be wary of attacking if your defence is not secure.

Plate 21 (version 2)

This first technique shows the dangers in moving within the measures without a tempo.

- Start in terza on the outside in misura larga [you can hit your opponent with a lunge]
- Gentleman 1 (the agent) performs a cavazione [moving your blade from one side of your opponent's sword to the other] to the inside with a step.
- Gentleman 2 (the patient) executes a straight thrust in quarta, wounding the agent as they step.

Training note: this technique is an exercise in timing and intention. The agent believes that the patient will respond to the cavazione with a simple parry or by changing the line. The agent intends to use this tempo to wound the patient. Therefore, the patient must hit the agent as they step so that they cannot retreat or change their action. It may be worth practising this technique with quite a wide step/cavazione to start, making the movements smaller as the patient gains confidence.



Starting in terza on the outside



The thrust in quarta on Oli's (right) step

Nomenclature: generally, in any exercise, the agent refers to the person giving the tempo or opening to the patient, who executes the final technique and wounds. However, because we are trying to build a sequence of movements, I am going to refer to the practitioners as "gentleman 1" and "gentleman 2" (In the manner of Alfieri's treatise, no sexism intended) so that each movement builds on the last without the terminology changing. The idea is that in the final form, gentleman 1 will always execute the same movements, starting with the cavazione and gentleman 2 will always execute the initial thrust. The person receiving the hit will alternate as each action is added. For techniques that are not part of our form, I have simply referred to the agent and the patient.

Plate 22 (version 2)

This next technique is similar to the first, but starting from the inside. Also, the patient creates the tempo by their initial movement towards the opponent's blade.

- Start in terza on the inside in misura larga
- The patient moves to find the agent's sword
- The agent performs a cavazione to the outside and moves their right foot forward.
- The patient executes a straight thrust in terza, wounding the agent before their blade comes back into line.

Training note: again, this is all about timing. The direct thrust should be faster than the cavazione, although some swordsmen can execute the cavazione very quickly. You may need to traverse slightly to avoid walking onto your opponent's point.



The thrust in terza prevents Oli's sword returning into line.

Plate 45: Using the left hand

- Start in a terza to the outside
- Gentleman 1 (now the patient) performs a sudden cavazione to the inside
- Gentleman 2 (now the agent) attempts to wound with a straight quarta (c.f. plate 21)
- Gentleman 1 turns his hand into seconda and twists his body by turning the heel of his right foot. He uses his left hand to push away the agent's blade and wound him in the chest.

Gentleman 1 appears to give gentleman 2 a similar tempo to that in plate 21. However, in the first technique he performed the cavazione with a step and was wounded while his foot was moving. In this technique, gentleman 1 performs the cavazione without stepping, and so is able to move his body off of the line of attack. Giving your opponent a false tempo in which to attack is an invitation.

Plate 30: A mandritto to the head

We will now start to build up a sequence of techniques by modifying the action above.

- Start in a terza to the outside
- Gentleman 1 performs a sudden cavazione to the inside
- Gentleman 2 attempts to wound with a straight quarta (c.f. plate 21)
- Gentleman 1 turns his hand into seconda and twists his body by turning the heel of his right foot. He uses his left hand to push away the patient's blade and attempts to wound him in the chest.
- Gentleman 2 lowers his point and delivers a circular, downwards cut from the wrist, covering his opponent's blade with his hilt.

This demonstrates Fabris' preferred method of cutting – keeping the arm extended and cutting from the wrist to cover the opponent's line of attack.

In this case the cut is a natural response to the left hand parry, which tends to push your point down. You may also need to lift your hilt slightly to maintain cover against the thrust in seconda.

In theory, the thrust in quarta could be a feint to draw the counter attack, to which you respond with the cut. However, Fabris advises against feints which lose forward momentum (and end up taking three tempi – forwards, back and parry, redouble). Therefore you should try to cut when you see, or feel, your opponent pressing on your blade or moving to the thrust, but without changing your footwork. It may be easier then, rather than think of this as a feint, to simply think of the cut as a mutation of your action in response to your opponent's defence. (We could add in extra footwork, but I want to keep the workshop reasonably simple.)

Plate 28: Letting a cut pass harmlessly without parrying

I will conclude this section with a few of Fabris' defences against the cut. The first is Fabris' preferred defence, namely avoiding the cut and countering while the opponent's blade is out of line. The others demonstrate different ways of parrying a cut and are included to practise the variety of body movements in the system.

Following on from the previous sequence:

- Start in a terza to the outside
- Gentleman 1 performs a sudden cavazione to the inside
- Gentleman 2 attempts to wound with a straight quarta (c.f. plate 21)
- Gentleman 1 turns his hand into seconda and twists his body by turning the heel of his right foot. He uses his left hand to push away the patient's blade and attempts to wound him in the chest.
- Gentleman 2 lowers his point and delivers a circular, downwards cut from the wrist, covering his opponent's blade with his hilt.
- Gentleman 1 (if he can) withdraws his body and foot to let the cut fall harmlessly. If gentleman 2's sword falls out of line, gentleman 1 thrusts at his torso, keeping his sword over gentleman 2's blade to stop him bringing it back. (If gentleman 2 keeps his point on line, gentleman 2 should simply withdraw into guardia terza)

We could spend a whole workshop on body voids. For today (and for ease) simply try withdrawing the back foot and leaning away from your opponent.

Plate 35: Wound of prima under a riverso

The next wound could be used in the tempo of a cavazione, but we will use it as a defence against a riverso to the arm.

- Start in terza on the inside
- The patient moves to find the agent's sword.
- The agent attempts to cut the patient's arm with a riverso
- The patient turns into prima, covering his arm with his forte, lowers his body and wounds

The natural reaction against an attack is to defend. However, you must avoid moving through obedience. In this technique, you can use the cut as a tempo, attacking and defending in one motion.

Plate 38: Defence against the cut by passing in quarta

- Start out of measure in terza
- The patient steps in to find the agent's sword in terza on the outside
- The agent attempts to deliver a mandritto squalemrato (from the wrist) to the patient's face
- The patient passes forward with the left foot, wounding the opponent in the neck

Training note: When practising this, you may choose to avoid repeated thrusts to the neck, unless you have suitable neck protection. To make this technique work, you must lean forward and pass far enough that you can meet the cut before the blade returns in line.

Having passed with the left foot, you could pass again with the right foot and throw your opponent to the ground (plate 179). This may be safer than retreating, as your opponent may be able to strike you as you pass their point.



A pass in quarta. The aim is to parry the cut before it has gained momentum.

Putting it all together: The first School of the Sword form

The aim of this form is to practise a sequence of the techniques covered earlier in some kind of logical fashion. Each part of the form builds on the last and adds an extra technique. In fact, you have already covered each section of the form – all we need to do is put it together and add a clear beginning and a clear end.

Phase 1: Entering into measure

Begin facing your partner out of measure, with you feet together and your sword held in your left hand as if it were in a scabbard. Make sure you know who is gentleman 1 and who is gentleman 2!

1. “Draw” your sword into prima.
2. Advance towards your partner with four passing steps (left, right, left, right) ending in terza on the outside of your partner’s blade and on the edge of measure (points just overlapping). You should try to judge your starting distance and your steps so that you end as described above. If you are slightly out, gentleman 1 will be able to adjust the distance with their first step.

Phase 2: The techniques

3. Gentleman 1 performs a cavazione to the inside with a step forward and to the right – gentleman 2 responds with a thrust in quarta. Both return to guardia terza and reset on the starting line.
4. Gentleman 1 performs a cavazione without a step – gentleman 2 responds with a thrust in quarta – gentleman 1 performs the left hand parry and thrust in seconda. Both return to guard.
5. Gentleman 1 performs a cavazione without a step – gentleman 2 responds with a thrust in quarta – gentleman 1 performs the left hand parry and thrust in seconda – gentleman 2 performs the circular cut. Both return to guard.
6. Gentleman 1 performs a cavazione without a step – gentleman 2 responds with a thrust in quarta – gentleman 1 performs the left hand parry and thrust in seconda – gentleman 2 performs the circular cut – gentleman 1 performs the void and thrust in terza. Both return to guard.

Phase 3: Retreating out of measure

7. Retreat with four passing steps (right, left, right, left) and pause in terza.
8. Return to your starting position with your feet together and your sword “in its scabbard”.

It would now be a good idea to swap roles and repeat the exercise. To do this more neatly, do not put the sword away in step 8 after retreating. Simply pause, then return to step 2 and advance into measure. Thus the sequence will be: Draw – advance – techniques – retreat – advance – techniques (roles reversed) – retreat – sheath sword.

The form should be performed with intent or energy – you are not just walking through the techniques. Try to push your partner to perform their defences correctly (which includes performing your attacks correctly).

You could even make phase 2 antagonistic – really try to make your techniques work and hit. (But do not add anything to the techniques and, if your partner performs the defence correctly, let them hit you. Do not “spoil” your partner’s technique. Only try to perform yours as well as you can.)

Part III: Proceeding without stopping

Fabris devotes his second book to a single concept, with which he claims you can face any opponent. As mentioned earlier, I think the root of the concept and why it should work are quite easy to understand. However, putting the techniques into practice requires a level of skill and judgement that only comes with experience. Nevertheless, I think the core principles are useful at any level and practising the techniques as drills can improve blade control and understanding of tempo.

The core concept is simply this: once you have started to gain an advantage over your opponent, you should press your attack without pausing in guard. There are two reasons for this:

- 1) If you pause in guard, you may give away your advantage and the tempo
- 2) If you keep moving, you will always be ahead of your opponent and can react quickly to anything they do.

Fabris describes several different variations on this theme. We will look only at the first.

- Start in terza out of measure.
- Advance into measure with your front foot, placing your *debole* against your opponent's.
- Continue by passing with you left foot, running you blade along your opponent's. You are aiming to put you hilt against your opponent's *debole*. (Where you point started.)
- Finish by passing all the way to your opponent's body.

You should proceed slowly, but with resolution as you will need to adapt your action depending upon the response of your opponent. You can also vary the speed of your action so that you are always ahead of your opponent, but never rushed.



The step, putting your point near theirs



The second step, putting you hilt near their point



The third step, making the hit

Some possibilities for adapting your action, depending upon the response of your opponent are as follows:

- If they try to cavazione, simply turn your blade into terza or seconda to meet theirs and keep going.
- If they try to engage your blade early in the motion, you can cavazione and continue.
- If they try to force your blade away during the second step, you can yield to the pressure and hit by voiding your body (shown below).
- If they try to force your blade away late in the motion, you should have mechanical advantage over their blade and be able to resist the pressure.



In these two photos, Phil is yielding to pressure from Oli, by turning into seconda and voiding low with his body as he makes the hit.

Ultimately, you should be able to draw your sword and immediately proceed towards your opponent, gaining the advantage and wounding them before they have even settled in guard.

If nothing else, this drill may help you to push forward on your attacks. I include it as a bonus section to give you a full picture of Fabris' work.

I hope you enjoyed the workshop. Please feel free to email any comments or questions to phil@schoolofthesword.com.

Additional articles and training videos are available through our website www.schoolofthesword.com

Train slow, learn fast. Train hard, fight easy. Good luck.

Phil Marshall
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References:

Leoni, Tom, Art of Dueling. Texas: Chivalry Bookshelf, 2005