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Authentic Swiss watchmaking



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The master of minimalism



Left: the *Tischkalender*, in which the perpetual calendar module is separate from the movement, earned Strehler election to the AHCI as its youngest member.

Right: Strehler's watch movements are properly finished but never over-decorated. The UhrTeil workshops give him the luxury of designing his own movements and components.

Far right: Strehler's first butterfly-bridge watch with the going train reduced to just two large wheels: the one on the right running off twin barrels, and the smaller wheel on the left driving the escape pinion.

Alan Downing

While no self-respecting brand would ever let an anniversary escape without a lavish display of self-importance, for the independent watchmaker birthdays are necessarily more modest affairs.

For Andreas Strehler it was a friends-and-family barbecue in the garden behind his workshops. No speeches, no dignitaries, only one other journalist, though a low-slung and expensive machine parked in the front hinted that an important collector of Strehler's CHF 80,000 plus watches could be among the guests.

He was officially celebrating 20 years as an independent creator and maker of watches – a relatively minor activity – while taking the opportunity to show off the rare capabilities of his UhrTeil workshops – the bread and butter of his family enterprise.

Strehler's establishment – he lives above the workshops – lies beyond the borders of Swiss watchmaking in the town of Sirnach, Canton Thurgau, northeastern Switzerland – a place so secluded that during World War II British Commonwealth troops that had escaped prisoner of war camps into Switzerland (the *évadés*) were billeted there.

An unusually creative mind at work. The mid-1990s was a propitious time for a watchmaker to make the transition from comfortable employment (at Renaud & Papi in Strehler's case) to precarious independence. There was plenty of work to do. Brands relied heavily on anonymous outside talent as they struggled to keep up with the demand for new and more ingenious mechanisms. Ever higher auction prices for vintage watches brought them out of the backs of drawers into the hands of independent restorers; promoters were avid for amazing mechanical gadgetry. Strehler was soon busy meeting all these demands. But the true horological creator needs to stun the world with a demonstration of his skills, ingenuity and original approach. For that Strehler produced something that had never been done before: a desk perpetual calendar that advanced every 24 hours, regulated by a detachable pocket watch. When the pocket watch is removed to be worn, the calendar stops. With the return of the watch, the calendar calculates how long it has been away and advances accordingly to the right date, day, month and year. The *Tischkalender* was not a

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commercial proposition, but the ingenious symbiosis between watch and separate perpetual calendar, an inversion of Abraham-Louis Breguet's *pendule sympathique*, told the watch industry that an unusually creative mind was at work. More tangibly, it earned Strehler election to the select academy of independent horological creators, the AHCI. He was the youngest member.

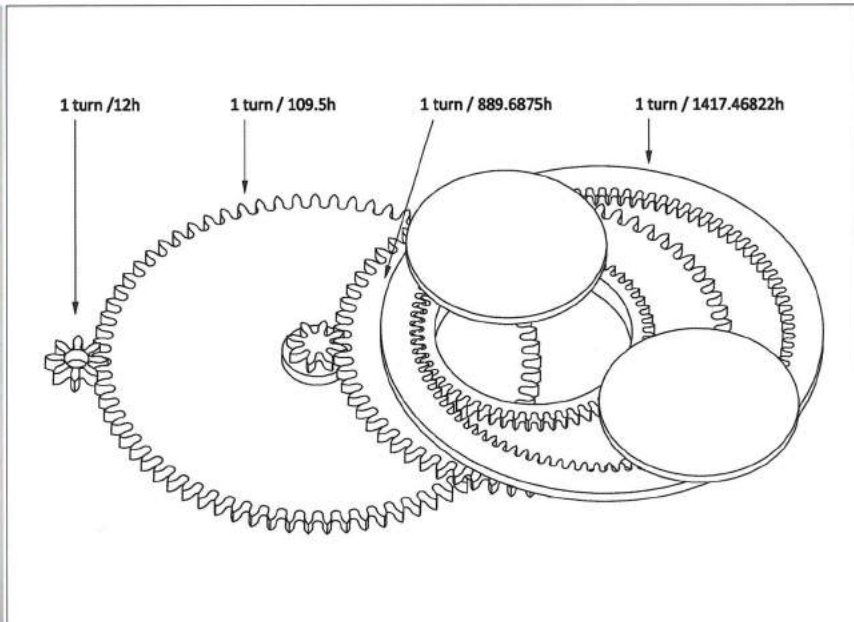
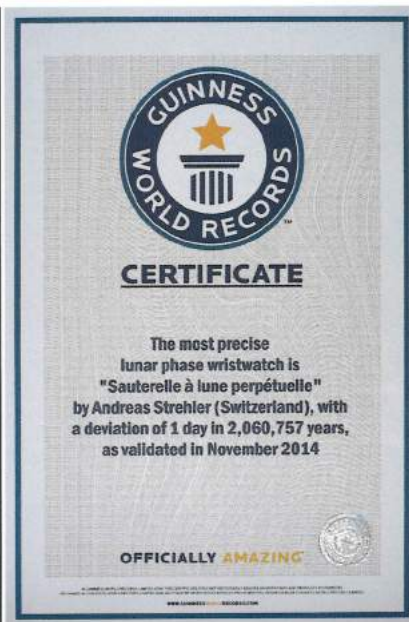
The principle of parsimony. Strehler's next demonstration piece, the Zwei pocket-watch, proclaimed a watchmaking philosophy that he upholds to this day. It's a simple pocket-watch with two hands that can be switched from telling the time to indicating the date and the month. With its multi-tasking hands and numerals, the Zwei defined mechanical elegance by conjuring complexity out of simplicity. While brands were vying to pile complication upon complication, Strehler proclaimed mechanical minimalism, an Occam's Razor cutting through the tangle of wheels, springs and cams to produce mechanical art of great simplicity and beauty. It was this watchmaking approach that

earned him the Gaia Prize in 2013, awarded for "the creation of minimalist mechanical movements designed like living organisms."

Early this year, Strehler pulled off a spectacular display of horological minimalism when he used a gear train of just four wheels to drive moonphases that would take more than two million years to accumulate a deviation of one day from the real moon. Claims of moonphase accuracy of hundreds or even thousand of years became immediately irrelevant and the Sauterelle à lune perpétuelle made it into the *Guinness World Records*.

Escaping anonymity. But having become independent, the watchmaker finds himself swept into anonymity, an un-named supplier of watchmaking ideas and expertise to capricious brands. For such a watchmaker, to try to make a name for himself is considered the height of presumption. In the Swiss watch industry as in other institutions, the tall poppy is scythed down.

Thus it was in his own quiet corner that Strehler created the aesthetic dimension of a minimalist



wristwatch movement – the “living organisms” described in the Gaia citation. His butterfly calibre describes the outline of the openwork bridge, with curves sweeping from jewel to jewel across the movement. The entire movement is revealed, delicate, fluttering and poised.

There was one way out of anonymity: the Harry Winston Opus series. But the privilege of signing your own creation (at a respectful distance from the HW logo) does not come cheap. The deadline is usually impossible, the demands outrageous and the step Harry Winston provides can lead down as well as up.

Harry Winston liked the butterfly design and the switch from one indication to another as demonstrated in the Zwei. They commissioned a combination of both for the Opus 7.

For Strehler, the production of 61 complicated watches was a massive undertaking and far beyond the capacity of his workshop in the family home in Winterthur. It meant a move to the bigger premises in Sirnach, hiring staff, and developing conical gears for differentials.

Although all the watches were quickly sold, Strehler did not do well out of it financially, but the other benefits were far greater. His UhrTeil workshops now had the capacity for ambitious projects, he had perfected the design and manufacture of conical gears, and some of the brands that he had hitherto served anonymously, condescended to associate his name with theirs. Thus does H. Moser & Cie acknowledge him as their de-facto technical director, while Maurice LaCroix and Chronoswiss are proud to admit that he makes their chronographs.

However it is another matter where French is the language of watchmaking. For a prestigious *manufacture* in Geneva or Neuchâtel, reliance on the expertise of a rösti-eating watchmaker from far beyond the cultural centre of *haute horlogerie* is too shameful to be admitted.

In 2008, the year after Opus 7, Strehler produced the first of his Papillon wristwatches that he had been designing and constructing for the past six years. They were shortly followed by the entomological Cocon, Sauterelle and an updated version

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Far left: The "officially amazing" feat earned him a world record.

Left: With just four gear wheels, Strehler reduced the discrepancy between his mechanical moon and the real moon to just one day in more than two million years.

Right: There's no standard *remontoir d'égalité*, which gives watchmakers the opportunity to show off their mechanical creativity. Strehler's compact design fits into the train without a tourbillon.



of the Papillon, all with butterfly bridges, but each a separate construction. No standard component or even design is used. Strehler conceived a new and simpler winding and setting system based on conical gears for smoother transmission. Conical gears are also used in a compact differential for the power reserve. The movement of the Cocon is built on both sides of a central plate, a construction he developed for H. Moser & Cie. Other inventions include differential stopwork instead of the Maltese cross to isolate the middle, and more stable, part of the twin mainsprings' power output. In the Sauterelle model, a *remontoir d'égalité* of ingenious simplicity ensures that the amplitude of the balance remains constant for 78 hours. What you won't find is a tourbillon, which Strehler dismisses as "a 200-year-old marketing gag." He made a surfeit of them at Renaud & Papi.

Beyond the brands. Who buys such watches? According to Strehler, his customers have already bought expensive pieces from the big brands and are simply progressing to another level. He is

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Strehler lives above his UhrTeil workshops in the discreet little town of Sirmach, beyond the frontiers of Swiss watch-making in the northeast of the country.



An impromptu presentation by Strehler at his 20th anniversary celebrations catches the attention of eminent watch-makers.

acquainted with them all, as he only makes around 10 watches a year. They are all very different kinds of people he says.

What do they get for leaving the comfort zone of a brand universe? Certainly originality: a complete creation by one watchmaker, working alone, inspired only by the forms of nature and an obsession with mechanical efficiency. A branded watch, however expensive, remains designed by a committee and produced by scores of anonymous workers.

So far as looks are concerned, the pictures replace a thousand words of purple prose. One can only recognize a determined and sincere artistic effort. Decoration is kept to a minimum because it is too fragile. Sandblasting for example is likely to be marked at the first service. The watch has to look new for as long as possible, and be repairable by future watchmakers. The workmanship is beyond reproach with properly executed internal corners. The watches also illustrate the capabilities of the UhrTeil facility – a flexible machine park capable of turning out any horological component as well as

pick-up arms and medical equipment. The machine tools, some of which Strehler designed and built himself, range from a 1960s Hauser jig borer to the latest multi-axis machining stations, custom-programmed by UhrTeil's software engineers. UhrTeil is the leading supplier of conical gearing, particularly for the spherical differentials of multiple tourbillons, and one of the three suppliers of micro ball-bearings. It designs and manufactures movements and modules for brands, transferring production when the brand has installed the capacity to claim *manufacture* status.

The next step? For the horological enthusiast it is of course to have a unique watch, made for you alone. Not just an individualised watch, but an entirely new movement, engineered to meet industrial production standards. Strehler will oblige for a "manageable" budget.

For the independent watchmaker it can only be the wish that the hundred or so timepieces he makes in his lifetime will be treasured and admired long after he is dead, and that he may be more than a just a footnote in horological history. ●