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On a Wing and a Prayer

Many stereotypes come to mind on hearing about Maximilian Büsser, former Managing Director at Harry Winston Timepieces, now soloist in the luxury watch segment: new kid on the block, maverick, iconoclast, revolutionary, perhaps. They all fit a little, but not enough to give the whole picture.

Sitting amongst standard-issue, somewhat noisy businessmen at the Bar des Bergues of the Four Seasons in Geneva, Maximilian Büsser stands out the way a gentle hero might in a Hollywood movie. The face is refined and friendly, unshaven to perfection; long, narrow fingers with well-groomed nails calmly hold a glass of juice. His dress is casual elegance, dark blazer, white, open shirt. There is a glow about him, a mix of impishness and willfulness that crackles through the smile, a fast light moving surreptitiously in the eyes. Büsser is one of the men with an elbow in the ribs of the Swiss luxury watch industry; but nothing about him would suggest it. No great power quotes, no grand gestures, no flashiness. In fact, almost self-consciously, his left arm seems to avoid any movement that would reveal the large, red-gold Horological Machine No. 1 with its two partly concatenated dials forming, synchronistically perhaps, a renaissance, the symbol of infinity and time union. In the middle is the tourbillon, slightly elevated to permit a glance into the watch's interior workings. This is Büsser's kick-off product, and it is about to be born officially.

Imagine

Not astonishingly, this *enfant terrible* of the watchmaking craft – or is it the *Wunderkind*? – is quick to mention children and how their approach to life is filled with unbound energy and sheer innocence. “I want to recapture, rekindle that ‘everything is possible’ attitude you have as a child, wanting to be a fighter pilot, a fireman, whatever,” he says, eyes on fire. If there ever was a mission statement for his company MB&F, that is it. “And then you know you will have to become a corporate banker,” he adds, his expression sagging suggestively. This, he explains, is why he has pictures of the people he works with as children as well on his website, to remind them and others of times when they were not so reasonable.

Büsser himself is a child of our boundary-free world. Born in Italy of a Swiss-German father and an Indian mother, he admits to being a “multicultural experiment.” His father tried to imbue him with a very strong work ethic that he sums up in the simple statement: “Work hard, respect everyone, and you will have a not-too-bad life.” A reasonable man trying to bring up a reasonable son, Büsser senior must have nevertheless had a vigorous sense of adventure himself, having spent many years outside the country in India. Toying with his little cars, Maximilian Büsser dreamt of

becoming an automobile designer and studied microtechnology engineering at the EFPL in Lausanne. In 1991, stepping onto the market and imbued with youthful vim and vigor, he was hired as a product manager at Jaeger-LeCoultre. The venerable company was just beginning to turn the corner after bankruptcy. At the time, Büsser points out, the company had the Reverso, which no-one wanted to buy, apparently. Seven years later, when he left, the same line of watches made up 80% of the company's volume.

“I had been fostering other peoples' babies for years, and wanted my own child.”

For an articulate, intelligent man of 31, with a lot of charm and especially imagination, Jaeger was not the place to grow old, apparently. And fortune did smile on him, aided by a solid dose of reputation, obviously. In 1998, he was contacted by a headhunter, who offered him a job as Managing Director of Harry Winston Timepieces. It was a position that many would relish, but Büsser is not unrealistic: “I thought the headhunter needed his head examined,” he states categorically, “and when Harry Winston gave me the job, I thought the company should have *its* head examined!” Convinced that he would never get the job, Büsser went through the four-month vetting process, and landed squarely in the MD chair.

Time going crazy

Turning around a watch division with a team of seven assistants represented both a challenge and a fabulous opportunity for exploration, especially for a person with the right mix of rationality and creativity. By 2005, the team had grown to 80 and HWT had established a global reputation as a daring horological innovator with the fascinating and extremely successful Opus series. The concept behind Opus was to establish collaborations with independent watchmakers not necessarily bound by traditional aesthetics, producing a single watch a year. The glint returns to his eyes when he recalls these heady days. He mentions the Opus 3, which brought together HWT with the genial Vianney Halter, whose Antiqua series raised eyebrows a decade ago – perhaps because of the four different-sized dials that forced the user to actually move his eyes? For

HWT, Halter designed an incredible machine, with myriad wheels

Seven-year itch

to tell time and numbers that jump into little portholes. For the uninitiated, it looks like a tiny one-armed bandit.

Besides causing quite a stir in the segment, the Opus 3 also drew the attention of Felix Baumgartner, watchmaker, and Martin Frei, designer, founders of Urwerk, an independent watchmaking operation. Their unconventional, three-dimensional approach to time-telling fit perfectly with Büsser's next madcap idea, the Opus V. (Note that to calm spirits and give more traditional customers something to purchase at HWT, Büsser alternated the uncanny with the canny, thus the even-numbered Opuses are more staid). The Opus 5 was a space-age construction with laterally rotating blocks to show the hours on a dial that completely breaks up the classic circularity of time on the wrist. It also featured a five-day power reserve and a service indicator. Suffice to say, the horological world takes a deep breath before each presentation by HWT.

Not everyone appreciated these self-assured wild cards: in an interview on the Horomundi.com site, Büsser recalls that his team at HWT thought he was a few jewels short of a movement... "I recall even a famous and rightly esteemed designer I asked for help on the diamond-set version who just bluntly turned me down, saying that he wanted nothing to do with this 'abomination.' And the only retailer I consulted before the official presentation, himself very specialized in complicated watches, stared at me in disbelief when I showed him the designs and asked me, albeit politely, 'Who the hell is going to buy this piece?'" Exciting times for Büsser, no doubt, but he did end up with an ulcer.

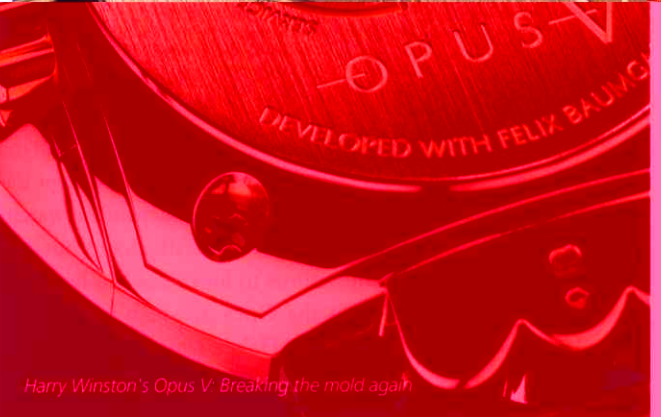
Like some unwinding spring on an abandoned watch, Büsser's time at HWT was running out, and there was no culprit other than his own vision of creating watches himself, unfettered by the demands of the corporate world. "I had been fostering other peoples' babies for years, and wanted my own child." At some point, in a moment when that inner child was beginning to kick, Büsser fell in love with the idea of founding his own company to give birth to his ideas in three-dimensional form. Taking a page from his work at HWT, he envisioned working with small teams ("friends" as he calls them) with the best, independent watchmakers and designers, giving them complete freedom to let their creative juices flow. On the day the HWT Board validated a new factory, whose existence was much his own doing, Büsser submitted his resignation, much to the consternation of his staff.

**"They don't have to work for me,
they want to work with me."**

"My father always said: do what you like in life, because you will be good at it," he remarks. At HWT, he admits, he found out what he liked and what he didn't like. "I wanted to create products without having to be afraid of what people thought of them," he says excitedly. "So there's definitely an anti-market aspect. I did not want to identify a market and then go create a product for it, no, it was about creating a product you really want to do and don't be afraid if everybody says it's insane." There were also deeper considerations and the issue of power that comes with the turf at a larger enterprise. On this issue he grows philosophical: "People in powerful positions believe they have power because they are heading a company with X number of people, and they have power over the lives of those people. I realized that the real power you get when you relinquish authority." He spotted the fine difference between having people work for him at HWT and having people work with him at MB&F. "They don't have to work for me, they want to work with me," he says with a rare note of triumph in the voice. "The power of motivation is phenomenal, and that is how I have been able to work for two years, seven days a week, 12 to 15 hours a day without getting tired. Because the exhilaration of this energy is mirrored by the people I work with."

There were other elements that conspired to convince Büsser to invest all his savings – CHF 700,000 – in a completely new enterprise. His father, perhaps his strongest tie to the principles for "reasonable" behavior, died. And after the death of a friend at 45, another friend said: "I don't know anybody who, two minutes before dying has said 'Damn, I should have worked harder in my life!'" So he definitely wanted to work only with people he liked and respected because, "If I am going to be hit by a bus tomorrow, I want to think that I have amongst others lived my own life and not the life social pressure cut out for me" he remarks, adding: "It's very utopian, all this."

And so Maximilian Büsser, age 37, former Managing Director at HWT and Product Manager at JLC, set out to develop a business model that would fulfill his dream of being creative and free. It demanded making very few units per year ("I only have to please 30 people in the world!"). It also meant working with the *crème*



Harry Winston's Opus V. Breaking the mold again



Tradition and inspiration for the Horological Machine No. 1



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