



firing on all cylinders

FROM THE OUTSET, JEAN DUNAND'S WATCHES HAVE PACKED FEW HOROLOGICAL PUNCHES. FOUNDER THIERRY OULEVAY AND TWEEZER-WIELDING GENIUS CHRISTOPHE CLARET HAVE TAKEN HUGE RISKS WITH OUTLANDISH MECHANISMS AND AN UNCOMPROMISING EXCLUSIVITY THAT PUTS MOST LUXURY BRANDS TO SHAME. BUT, AS OULEVAY TELLS **ALEX DOAK**, THIS SELF-BELIEF IS PAYING OFF – NOT LEAST WITH 'SHABAKA', A WATCH THAT STRIKES THE BALANCE BETWEEN ART DECO AND THE LAS VEGAS SLOTS



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"Our best mechanical solutions for Shabaka include the four synchronised 90-degree transmissions for the calendar cylinders, and the instantaneous calendar jump, when a pre-armed spring is released," says Thierry Oulevay breezily. "It needed a flywheel train to dampen the inertia of the rotating cylinders."

No, you're not expected to understand this any more than I do, but it just goes to show how unlike your average slick entrepreneur Oulevay actually is. Of course, there's no doubting his business acumen or canny intuition for an unexploited gap in the market, but it's rare to find someone so high in the horological food chain so eager to discuss the nuts and bolts of his product (in this case, the slot-machine-style rollers that show the date on his latest Jean Dunand watch).

Oulevay's exposure to high-end mechanical watchmaking has been lengthier than most, however. Having sharpened his claws on Piaget, the maestro of ultra-elegance, he then sank them into the defunct Bovet brand in 1997, reviving an illustrious legacy of Swiss horology with an Oriental twist. And for all of Bovet's complicated movements, Oulevay immediately deferred to 'shadow watchmaker' Christophe Claret and his crack workshop of elite artisans.

"Christophe is a watchmaking genius as well as an impressive entrepreneur," Oulevay says respectfully. "Working with a genius is not always easy – he is a strong-minded man. But he works in Le Locle, I work in Geneva, so we get along fine."

Like most of the industry, Claret's hi-tech atelier is buried in a remote and snowy valley, somewhere in the Swiss Jura. There, save for the occasional clank of a cowbell, serenity reigns; most conducive to the delicate task of assembling, testing, dismantling and reassembling the hundreds of parts that constitute any one movement (Shabaka, by way of scale, has 721). It might sound like a cheat, but employing Claret as a mercenary for Bovet is actually a very Swiss way of watchmaking. Girard-Perregaux, Ulysse Nardin and Harry Winston, amongst many others, certainly haven't been too proud to do the same for their more ambitious projects, despite the current craze for keeping your 'manufacture' independent – actually a prohibitively expensive way of doing things even for the big boys, and impossible to boot, unless you really want to set up an alligator farm in deepest Switzerland to make your own straps.

When Oulevay left Bovet in 2001, it was therefore to Claret that he instinctively turned for his next project. Unlike Bovet however, this project was not to be an exercise in mass production with the occasional series of 'serious' pieces commissioned to Claret. Oulevay wanted instead to create a brand-new, niche brand where every watch was genuinely unique, technically exceptional and restricted to no more than 300 pieces a year. Rather a risk in today's overcrowded market, surely?

"As long as people in charge of niche brands remain totally focused on what they do best, they have a chance," Oulevay tells me. "Yes, it is easy to make a fatal mistake at this level; collectors are very demanding in terms of product, image and service nowadays. You must therefore be very careful in everything you undertake, have a strategy and stick to it by all means."

Oulevay's strategy at the outset was certainly singleminded, but hadn't quite stretched to imagining what exactly his watches would do:

"I had no idea! I went to Christophe with the concept of an Art Deco inspired watch, blending innovative high technology with more traditional crafts – 'métiers d'art', in French. He then showed me his Tourbillon Orbital, and it was a revelation."

To avoid the danger of attracting, shall we say, a less-than-exclusive clientele, Claret usually exercises a strict policy of making only tourbillons – Breguet's mesmerising device that steadily rotates the ticking balance within a cage – usually in combination with another complication such as a chiming 'minute repeater' (yours from circa £150,000). With 'Tourbillon Orbital' however, he surpassed himself with one of the most revolutionary interpretations of the tourbillon ever devised. Revolutionary in more ways than one, as it solved the nagging issue of how to revolve an already revolving tourbillon around the dial – effectively adding a second axis to the same plane of rotation.

An idea he'd been sitting on, tweaking and refining for a few years, it took Oulevay's mutual enthusiasm (and of course mutual spirit of entrepreneurship) to coax him into developing the Tourbillon Orbital for the market. Up to that point, Claret had played the game by the cardinal industry rule: there are no famous watchmakers in Switzerland, only famous brands. But with Oulevay he had finally been lured out of the shadows and into the limelight, albeit beneath the umbrella of 'World Premiere Watchmaking' – more evocatively subtitled 'Jean Dunand'.

Jean Dunand is one of those names that just seem to belong on a watch dial. Yet Oulevay and Claret named their fledgling brand not after a horologist, but a Swiss-born artist they both admired, who became one of the greatest craftsmen of the Art Deco era.

Dunand was especially celebrated for the designs that lent sheen to some of the great French cruise liners of the 1920s and '30s, notable amongst them 'Normandie'. It was the perfect name, as it speaks of how, beyond the unmistakable aesthetic, Art Deco embraced new technology, prioritising craftsmanship and functionality – all worthy ingredients in any high-end timepiece.

After a brief interlude to make a six-piece 'Grand Complication' series – an awkward club sandwich of horology's greatest hits (tourbillon, perpetual calendar, minute repeater, split-seconds chronograph) – Jean Dunand moved on from the Tourbillon Orbital daringly fast last year, with Shabaka. Like the watch's bizarre design, its name divides opinion, but there is method in Oulevay's madness: "Shabaka is named after the first Egyptian pharaoh of the 25th dynasty. We got our inspiration from the 1920s fashion for ancient Egyptian design that followed the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun."

At CHF540,000 (about £250,000), Shabaka is a costly gamble, but delivery has already commenced, and the queues are snaking around the valleys of the Jura. It is undoubtedly that one-arm-bandit date display that is drawing the crowds; I suspect the minute repeater is mere icing on the cake, despite the immense amount of skill required to assemble and 'tune' the mechanism's tiny hammers and gongs, which ring-out the time to the nearest minute. Even more tellingly, the tourbillon – Claret's calling card – isn't even conspicuous by its absence. This proves beyond any doubt the shy watchmaker's faith in his incredible cylinder mechanism, not to mention the direction Jean Dunand is taking him.

"The cylinders were Christophe's idea, as we wanted to come up with a totally different way of displaying information; to make information easier to read," Oulevay enthuses. "I could recently 'play' with the first fully assembled movement, and it was a real joy."

"We both share this vision for the future of watchmaking at the highest possible level, and it is very exciting. Christophe and I only recently decided on our next challenge, for presentation in 2009, and it took us no more than five minutes to be 100% in agreement on the concept."

Judging by the story of this remarkable relationship so far, you'd probably be wasting your time even trying to imagine what's on the cards.

Further information
www.jeandunand.com



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'Pieces Uniques' by name...

The Tourbillon Orbital is a true world premiere. Timing tests even claim it returns the now-ubiquitous tourbillon to its original role as a precision device. As well as rotating the regulatory organ of the watch by 360 degrees every minute, thus averaging-out gravity's effect on the delicate balance spring, it rotates the whole tourbillon assembly (visible through the dial's round window) around the centre of the movement every hour – a fiendishly clever set-up involving nothing much more than a set of reciprocating ball bearings. Its launch in 2005 won Claret and Oulevay universal plaudits, and Jean Dunand's waiting list began to stack up. True to form however, production in 2007 alone did not exceed 30 pieces, and no two have ever resembled each other, nor ever will. Head of Jean Dunand's PR, Surya Hill recounts a telling anecdote to illustrate her brand's purist approach: "One Tourbillon Orbital had a 'black' opal dial, whose dial alone cost over \$50,000, as it was extremely difficult to find an opal big enough – not to mention the difficulties of slicing the stone down to 0.1mm without it snapping. After months of work, we finally assembled the watch and put it on display at Wynn in Las Vegas. A man and a woman customer both expressed an immediate interest, but both were hesitating, and in the end the woman said she'd think about it and come back. The other man purchased it right away. Of course, the lady wanted another one, but our answer? Impossible, as Jean Dunand only makes unique pieces!"