

THE INITIATE

ROMAIN GAUTHIER
IS INDUCTED INTO
THE INNER CIRCLE
OF WATCHMAKING'S
INDEPENDENTS







By Wei Koh

Romain Gauthier makes it look easy. You talk to him and he speaks of how he transitioned from being a precision engineer at François Golay – one of the watch industry’s best known specialists in the fabrication of watch components, to an MBA student, to founder of a new brand, to the creator of an intelligent new watch caliber, to a member of the lofty Time Aeon organization – populated by those other denizens of independent watchmaking’s elite Philippe Dufour, Greubel Forsey and Kari Voutilainen – with almost casual ease. But his path has been marked by immense challenges and tempered by no small measure of ingenuity. The reason that Gauthier feels so deeply connected to the craft of watchmaking is that he hails from Switzerland’s Vallée de Joux, the very heart of the Swiss watchmaking industry. Following their exodus from France, Protestant watchmakers brought their craft to this region and taught local farmers the magic craft of horology. Over two centuries later, “the Vallée” as it was referred to by locals, is still producing some of watchmaking’s finest sons. Amongst them is Gauthier who officially became part of the Vallée’s population in 1975. After studying precision mechanics he took a job as a constructor of precision machinery. He was instrumental in helping the company François Golay to flourish by embracing the new technology of Computer Numeric Control machines that use mathematical code to cut metal parts to heretofore unattainable levels of precision. But at night and in his free moments, Gauthier dreamed of something more. A level-headed, determined young man with an uncanny knack for absorbing and processing details, he began to study the parts that he fabricated, cataloging in his mind their varying levels of performance and usefulness, memorizing the nuance of their construction techniques.

At 25 years of age in the year 2000, Gauthier decided to start his own horological business. But first Gauthier wisely decided to supplement his technical knowledge with financial savoir-faire. As such Gauthier enrolled in an intense MBA program where he focused on the viability of independent watch brands as his core métier.

During his program he visited his hero Philippe Dufour. It was only to Dufour that he could admit his deep unfulfilled need to stamp his mark on the enduring journal of horology and launch his own brand. It was Dufour, the grandmaster of independent watchmaking, who gauged Romain’s abilities, took stock of his determination and gave him his first push in the right direction. “You can do it,” he said. Romain Gauthier launched his watches

in 2006. At first glance they are slightly sober with a unique method of winding and setting related to a crown relocated to the watch back. But turn the watch over, look at the movement and you'll find a paradise for the technically inclined. Because within each Romain Gauthier watch is an artisan's paradise, a cornucopia of horology's riches. But why have me explain when he can tell you for himself...

HOW DID YOUR BACKGROUND AS AN ENGINEER AND AS AN MBA STUDENT PREPARE YOU TO FOUND YOUR BRAND?

I suppose I have an unusual background in that I am trained as an engineer but I also have an MBA. Over a decade ago, I was working in fabricating practically every kind of component for a watch movement supplier called Golay in the Vallée de Joux. I specialized in fabricating parts utilizing CNC machines. The advantage when I started my own company is that many watch brands are restricted in terms of what they can make for themselves. Bridges and plates in particular are predominately outsourced. But for my brand, I have the advantage of being able to make even the plate myself because of this experience.

YOU ALSO TOOK AN UNCONVENTIONAL PATH BY MAKING YOUR OWN ESCAPEMENT. CARE TO COMMENT WHY?

NORMALLY THE AXEL OF THE BALANCE IS MADE IN TWO PIECES, BUT I MADE MINE IN ONE PIECE

majority of brands are still totally dependent on Nivarox for their regulation components. While I have nothing against Nivarox, I wanted to be fully independent. So I create all the components of my escapement myself. The only thing outsourced is my hairspring but that too is from an independent supplier. So I am 100 percent independent of Nivarox.

BUT PRECISELY WHY DID YOU GO

THIS ROUTE? Look, the easiest way for me would have been to buy the kit for the regulator from Nivarox but there were two reasons I didn't do this. The first is that you cannot buy just a few components but you have to buy an entire kit which doesn't really allow you to customize or have anything different with your escapement. But the more overriding factor was that for me, it was very important to understand basic movements before I moved on to something else. So if this is the case, I knew that it was important to understand the heart of the movement. What better way is there than to make it yourself?

SO YOU WOULD SAY A TRUE WATCHMAKER SHOULD CREATE HIS OWN ESCAPEMENT?

I would say if you don't have this knowledge as a watchmaker, there is a huge hole in your development.

ANY RESISTANCE TO THIS IDEA?

Well the big companies try to scare you: they will tell you, "It is impossible to create an escapement." And so going into the project, I was intimidated



but I pushed on. Even when we had created the parts and assembled them, I was convinced it would take three to six months to sort out problems with it. It was to my shock that on the first day we had a result of five seconds error. This was quite astonishing and very inspiring. So in the end it was great to go in this direction because now I know how to make an escapement. It's crazy, it's like a dream come true.

WHY THE FAST VIBRATIONAL

SPEED? I wanted to have 28,800 vph to help enhance accuracy.

HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE IN

CNC MACHINING HELPED IN THE PROCESS OF CREATING YOUR OWN REGULATOR?

Understanding the properties of the material makes a big difference for creating resistant and stable parts. Look at the hardened beryllium balance wheel of the watch. It is perfectly symmetrical. It also has minimum weight at the center and maximum weight placed to the perimeter. Together, these factors create a highly accurate regulator. But you also need your balance to be stiff so that there is no deformation as it oscillates at these high speeds. I've shown journalist the balance and they are often surprised that something with such thin arms



THE HOURGLASS SHOWCASE

is impossible to deform by hand. This is due to the experience I have with CNC machines.

ANYTHING ELSE? Yes, normally the axle of the balance is made in two pieces, but I made mine in one piece. Why? So as to have as little flex as possible which again can affect the precision of the regulator. We resolve the problem of the fit between the axle and axle plate; using CNC, we can make ours monobloc. I think that these pieces demonstrate another way of creating micro-regulation components. Maybe Nivarox will be a bit afraid [laughs].

WHY A FREE SPRUNG BALANCE? I wanted to use the most stable system for the balance, and the inertia balance (free sprung balance) was the only way to go. If you look around at the companies that use this system, Patek Philippe, Audemars Piguet or individuals like Philippe Dufour, it is because they make a commitment to the highest level quality for their movement.

Because of my experience with CNC machines and fabricating watch components, I already had an idea as to what kind of parts make for a reliable running movement. I know the effects of making one component just too thin or too thick. Experience at creating watch components is invaluable to a watchmaker. I think this had a major influence on the completed movements running well. The very first movement I assembled and tested, there was an accuracy of five seconds per day.

YOUR ESCAPE WHEEL AND LEVER UTILIZE NICKEL PHOSPHOROUS. CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHY? The escapement wheel and lever are crafted using MIMOTEC technology. This is what I mean about taking the best of traditional and new technology. In LIGA, nickel pieces are grown to exhibit incredible precision and the pieces are rendered to have an extremely high polished look. LIGA gives you the liberty to make very complex forms so our escapement wheel in the finished watches will echo the look of our balance wheel. But I even machine the pinion of the escape wheel. There are really only a few components not made by me. Both the mainspring and the hairspring are purchased in Switzerland. Then there is the escape wheel and lever which I help design but are made by LIGA.

WHY THE SWISS ANCHOR ESCAPEMENT? I choose to use the Swiss anchor escapement because it is probably the best design in terms of reliability for a wristwatch.

BRING US BACK TO THE GENESIS OF YOUR BRAND... I started about nine years ago. In my mind it was relatively clear that I wanted to do something related to watchmaking. I wanted to have my own company. So I went to get an MBA.

A PRACTICAL BUT UNUSUAL ROUTE FOR WATCHMAKER, HOW



DID IT HELP? When I started my MBA I had two different ideas. At first I thought about creating a kind of consultancy business to high end collectors who were interested in really learning about the quality of the movements of the watches they were considering. I could suggest and talk very deeply about the quality of the movements. I love to talk about watches.

OK, BUT THIS WASN'T THE PATH YOU CHOSE OBVIOUSLY... No. There was also a second idea in my mind but for a while I didn't really dare to talk about it. It was during my MBA when I wrote papers on the business viability of independent watchmakers in the Swiss watch industry. So for this reason I went to visit Philippe Dufour. I slowly got to know him and it was gradually that I began to seek out his opinion. As you know he is quite a legend, one of the true fathers of independent watchmaking. For my thesis I decided to write a paper about the business model of starting a brand and it became relatively clear to me that my interest was really in this direction. It was really Philippe who showed me the light. I asked him, is it possible for one person to create a brand by himself and he said, "If you have the time, if you have enough patience, there is nothing that is impossible."

WOW THAT SOUNDS LIKE BOTH AN ENCOURAGEMENT AND A CHALLENGE... It really filled me with resolve. Suddenly I have a clear vision of the goal I wanted to achieve, to create my own brand, with watches that were uniquely my own. So after I received my MBA I started about setting up my own brand. This was in about 2002. So I started thinking about what kind of movement I would like to make. From the perspective of an engineer, I like to see how things work.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM PHILIPPE DUFOUR? I have learned from Dufour that God is in the details. So I polish all surfaces of the watch, even those that are not visible. In fact if you think about it, having a man polish pinions by hand makes no sense but it is a commitment to a certain type of craftsmanship that is starting to die out.



THERE IS A DUFOUR-LIKE AESTHETIC TO YOUR BRIDGES.

WERE YOU INSPIRED BY HIM? This kind of conception comes from the past. In the past, the Vallée de Joux was the place where most of the ebauches or raw movements for watches used throughout the world were created. So for me this was done as a big respect to the rich history of the Vallée de Joux. I liked very much the traditional Vallée de Joux decorations because I am from the Vallée de Joux. This is why I decorated the bridges this way. I also wanted to have sharp internal angles to demonstrate the amount of handwork that goes into this movement. If the angling is made by machine the angles will be round.

SO WE HEAR YOU ARE JOINING TIME AEON... Yes, I will be

joining Philippe Dufour, Kari Voutilainen and Greubel Forsey as part of Time Aeon. For me it is a great honor.

WHAT'S YOUR NEXT WATCH IDEA? I am interested in doing something related to regulation, to spatial position. Sometimes a tourbillon isn't in the right place related to the position of your arm. This is the reason that Greubel Forsey created the Double Tourbillon 30 Degrees and now the Quadruple Differential Tourbillon to compensate for a far greater number of positions. But it is not a tourbillon. I think this movement has never been made before and it is because of my experience with CNC machines that allows me to do this. I think it will be very different and very exciting. 📺

Time Aeon members (from left to right): Stephen Forsey, Kari Voutilainen, Philippe Dufour, Vianney Halter, Robert Greubel

