

# INDEPENDENTS' DAY

INDEPENDENT WATCHMAKERS ARE ENJOYING GREAT SUCCESS. INCREASINGLY, AFICIONADOS ARE WILLING TO SEARCH FOR, AND SPLURGE ON, UNIQUE TIMEPIECES. BUT INCREASED DEMAND RAISES PROBLEMS THAT CONTEND THE VERY PRINCIPLES INDEPENDENT WATCHMAKING IS BUILT UPON.

BY FLEUR FLETCHER

**THE TIME IS NOW** for independent watchmakers. "Let me tell you a story," says Antoine Prezioso, a watchmaker from Geneva. "Every year at the opening of Basel fair, all the big name brands rush to the AHCI [Academie Horlogere de Createurs Independents] stand to see what independent watchmakers have created." Unique timepieces are 'in' and aficionados are willing to splurge to get their hands on them. Exclusivity is key to independents' success and 'quality over quantity' their unofficial motto. But for all their triumphs, many now face a catch 22. Increase production to satisfy demand, but risk quality? Sell out to a larger company, and risk creative control? Or stick with the traditional path of independent watchmaking? Is it possible to enjoy quality and quantity simultaneously?

By nature, independent watchmakers shy away from marketing hype and sales-driven doggedness. As such, the watches themselves are the advertising. Many brands rely on word of mouth or the aficionados' drive to find something unique. In 1985, watchmakers Svend Andersen and Vincent Calabrese founded the AHCI to help showcase artistic watchmaking and the importance of craftsmanship. The current success of the independent industry owes much to the AHCI and the younger Time Aeon Alliance. These organisations provide a 'strength in numbers' philosophy and spread the word. "The AHCI has been extremely important to us as a platform to express our philosophy and present our watches to collectors," explains Peter Speake-Marin, an English watchmaker now based in Rolle, Switzerland. "I believe the Academy is essential to give young blood the possibility to develop, which in turn helps motivate the industry, even if in a small way."

After working for Patek Philippe and Antiquorum, Prezioso established his family business in 1990 – prime time as the industry gathered strength following the quartz crisis. Although presented with various opportunities, Prezioso is happy with the way things are for the time being. "I am very often contacted either for repurchase or for equity participations," he says. "But for the moment, being independent, *la vita e bella cosi!*" His son, recently graduated from

a watchmaking academy, is currently helping create tourbillions and his daughter, a jewellery designer, is launching a mechanical jewellery collection. Prezioso is immensely proud of his business and the family tradition it creates. Keeping it close-knit also allows them to make decisions and change strategic direction very fast. "By the time I am onto a prototype, big-name brands might still be discussing 'this and that'," he says.

Creative control is one of the main benefits of working independently. "The freedom to explore my own ideas and develop my own creativity [is the reason I became an independent]," says Speake-Marin. "In large companies, you are clearly required to follow the company philosophy, not your own, which is understandable. I knew there was so much I could do, I just had to get on and do it." Much like Prezioso, Speake-Marin is approached regularly by larger firms. He chooses to work with brands such as Harry Winston and MB&F, who acknowledge the designers behind the masterpieces.

Unfortunately, the work of watchmakers in manufactures went largely unnoticed by the public for many years. "The Swiss watchmaking cartel was suffocating the independent watchmakers it depended on by withholding public recognition of their skills," reports Alan Downing for Timezone UK. Pride and determination eventually drove them to launch their own businesses. Many of today's future independents find themselves in the same situation. As the McGonigle brothers (watchmakers from Ireland) tell AHCI, "It's safe to assume that new work from new watchmakers is quietly progressing behind closed doors. After all, making your own watch is the dream of most watchmakers."

Born in Finland, Kari Voutilainen completed his initial watchmakers' training at the world-renowned watchmaking school of Tapiola. He spent the next ten years restoring rare timepieces at Parmigiani Measure et Art du Temps. Everything he learnt was in preparation for a solo career. "During the days I worked for the company," he says. "But during my free time in the evenings, I started to create watches." With 18 years' experience under his belt, Voutilainen found the transition to independence easy.

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Independents are fiercely proud of their work. "There is a certain emotional attraction of knowing that a skilled hand, using traditional tools, has created a personal timepiece," says Philippe Dufour to *Europastar*. "It has its own internal vibration. It is something living and unique ... it is poetry from the hand." In 1982, Dufour spent 2000 hours on the world's first Grand and Petite Sonnerie minute repeater pocket watches. The integrity of watchmaking history and tradition is paramount to their work. "I follow the traditional paths of watchmaking with great nostalgia," he says. "I try to perpetuate the savoir faire of the great watchmakers of the Vallee de Joux region. I try to slow the erosion of this magnificent culture."

Ultimately it is the consumer's appreciation for the handmade which keeps the industry alive. "The people who buy my watches share a love of art, beauty and above all timepieces that aren't made by the thousand," says Preziuso. "This desire to stand out is something I encounter as much among the young as among wealthy captains of industry, sultans and princes who often want a one-off creation."

However, the allure of a big brand name will always be more attractive to some. This disappoints purists. Voutilainen, for example, believes the term 'haute horlogerie' is undeservedly over-used. "There are companies making watches without any [after sales care] infrastructure," he explains. "They have only an office with commercial staff who don't have any technical knowledge. It is very dangerous in the long term. There are a lot of companies like this. For me as an independent it doesn't make any difference, as I am not competing with them, and I make so few watches."

The future plans of these watchmakers vary. "I like to work as a watchmaker, and by increasing the production, it would be impossible," says Voutilainen. "Also, it would be impossible to keep the quality in the same level." Currently, he creates 20 watches a year and has orders until the end of 2009.

For Speake-Marin, expansion is necessary both financially and

creatively. "I am obliged to increase my production to assure a certain security for my future and also to develop the financial means to be able to develop larger, more complex projects." He won't, however, break the 1000 unit mark, and has no intention of selling to a larger brand. "I became independent to be free. I hope to never lose that freedom."

In contrast to idealistic and traditional views, the option of selling out to a larger brand can seem like good business sense. Andersen, an industry pioneer, believes selling his company gives it the opportunity for survival. At time of writing, he is in negotiations. "I arrived at the age of 65 and I have to transfer my experience so that the spirit can continue," he says. Certainly Greubel Forsey's decision to sell 20 per cent of the business to Richemont in 2005 has done no harm to its reputation or product. "This financial transaction is a good example of successful collaboration," Stephen Forsey told *Le Journal de la Haute Horlogerie*. "Having this backing from Richemont gives our own company a secure footing for the future." The company enjoys the benefits of independent creativity, with big business infrastructure. "Richemont helps us with I.T., provides distribution channels and marketing initiatives," explains Chantal Graff from Greubel Forsey. "We also have access to statisticians, who help us analyse sales and direction." But she is keen to clarify the company's autonomy. "It is only a partnership. We are still independent, and wish to stay this way. Greubel Forsey doesn't wish to be part of a group."

True aficionados will always be drawn to the allure of traditional handmade watches. "I think independents will be stronger in the future, due to the fact they can give the personal service to the client. The client can communicate with creator," says Voutilainen. But as the industry continues to grow, and popularity increases, one hopes that some keep old practices alive. "I hope that the industry keeps a cool head while still being creative, instead of concentrating on increasing productions," Voutilainen concludes. "Sometimes less is more." ○



# ANTOINE PREZIOSO

WATCHES PER YEAR 750  
PRICE CHF 11,500 (average)  
NEW RELEASE 2008 B-Side Tourbillon and automatic  
WAITING LIST 2 months for a watch from the collection, 3-12 months for a unique piece

# SVEND ANDERSEN

WATCHES PER YEAR 50-120  
PRICE CHF 17,000-75,00 if from the collection, no limit to unique timepieces  
NEW RELEASE 2008 Motre a Tact Poker Watch  
WAITING LIST Personalised painting 3-6 months, unique timepiece 1-2 years



# ROMAIN GAUTHIER

WATCHES PER YEAR 30  
PRICE CHF 36,000 to 47,000  
NEW RELEASE 2008 We haven't any  
WAITING LIST 6 months