



# Great Expectations



If you believe the adage that 'there are no coincidences,' then there must be a divine plan for Bovet. Not only has this watchmaker been the beneficiary of a handful of disparate yet complementary events and forces, the company seems to be creating a 'perfect storm' in 2010.

**Ken Kessler**

Thanks to a unique patented system, Bovet's Fleurier Amadeo range can be used as a wristwatch, a pocket watch, a table clock and much more



Fleurier Amadeo range, includes: (Left) The 2010 Bovet Fleurier Amadeo Butterfly Tourbillon. (Centre) The Tourbillon with Double Time Zone - Orbis Mundi. (Right) Fleurier Minute Repeater with white gold case and mother-of-pearl dial featuring a miniature painting of a white tiger.

Amidst the many dozens of revived watch names - some too spurious to dignify - Bovet possesses a heritage that makes its return both welcome and auspicious. To understand why this confluence is noteworthy, especially if you're the sort who marvels at history's 'non-coincidences', a look at the developments during Bovet's original incarnation will explain all.

Amongst the five sons of watchmaker Jean-Frédéric Bovet was the ambitious Edouard (1797-1849), who had completed his apprenticeship by the age of 17. Along with two of his younger brothers, Alphonse and Frédéric, Edouard was internationalised at an early age: in 1814-15, they were sent from Fleurier to London, then the most important centre in the world of horology, to further their skills. Here they were heavily influenced by English watchmaker William Ilbery, who had been producing watches for the Chinese.

Edouard's talents manifested themselves quickly, and in 1818, he was sent to Canton by his employer Magniac to repair watches for the nascent market. Canton was, at the time, the sole port of ingress into the Chinese market for otherwise mistrusted foreigners. Edouard carried with him a consignment of valuable timepieces, quickly selling four to a Mandarin for the then-astonishing sum of Fr.10,000, estimated to be \$1 million in today's money.

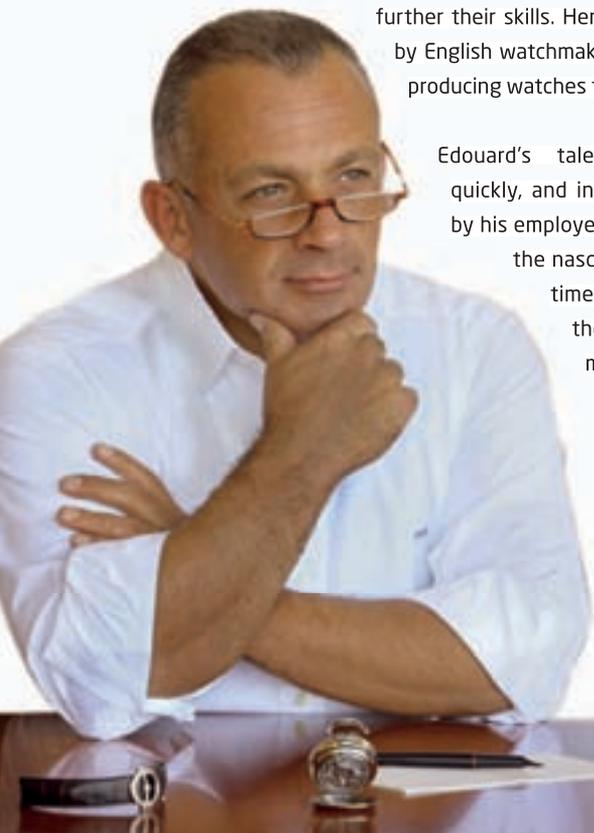
Edouard quickly realised both China's potential as a market for fine timepieces and his own abilities as a salesman; by 1822, he and his brothers had established Bovet as what was probably the first 'global' Swiss watch manufacturer, with a base in China, two brothers operating in London, and another brother remaining as a watchmaker in Fleurier.

Their success in supplying fine pocket watches to the Chinese aristocracy was immediate, the name itself - pronounced with a local accent as 'Boway' or 'Bo Wei' - even earning its own status as the prestige brand of pocket watch: some sources suggest that 'boway' served, for a time, as the Chinese word for 'watch'. The company even created a trademark for 'Boway', with Cantonese characters.

It is arguable, then, that the Bovets were Fleurier's, and perhaps Switzerland's initial emissaries into China. And it was a family affair, with the youngest brother eventually joining the enterprise as well. The distinctive timepieces appealed to China's upper classes, with signature features including inlaid pearl decoration and hand-painted, enamel miniatures. Movements were finely engraved and chased, leading Bovet to introduce glass back covers enabling clients to admire the inner workings - also possibly an industry 'first'. Another Bovet specialty was a 'dead beat' central seconds hand that jumped every second. As legend has it, the watches were so highly regarded that they also served as a form of currency.

### Political trials

In 1830, Edouard Bovet returned to Fleurier, but was forced to relocate to Besançon in France, having supported Neuchâtel's failed revolution against Prussian



Pascal Raffy, CEO and owner of Bovet's Fleurier SA.

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rule in 1831. While in exile, his home in Fleurier remained empty. Family members maintained the company and its Fleurier, London and Canton offices, while Edouard continued as a watchmaker.

Bovet was re-registered in 1840 as Bovet Frères et Cie, after the political situation had been resolved, Edouard having lived to see the back of the Prussians. The brothers had re-capitalised the company for an impressive one million francs, securing its future. Edouard passed away in 1849, leaving as his legacy not only a highly-successful firm but a respected one: in 1855, Bovet was famously awarded a Gold Medal at the World Exhibition in Paris for an identical pair of watches ordered by the emperor of China.

Inevitably, this market would feel the effects of the Opium War, as well as competition from other watch-producing countries including the USA and France, and - then as now - Chinese counterfeits. In 1864, the Bovets sold their interests to their manufacturing inspectors in Fleurier. Landry Freres purchased Bovet in 1888, with the trademark itself being sold in auction in 1901 to another family with a famous Swiss name: Cesar and Charles Leuba, as in Favre-Leuba. In 1918, the company was acquired by Jacques Ullmann and Co - which had a long history selling watches in China, but the Ullman company folded in 1932.

As in a game of ping-pong, the Bovet manufacture bounced between the Bovets - the brothers Albert and Jean, who produced and patented some interesting chronographs - and the Leubas. Favre-Leuba purchased the name and manufacturing facilities from the Bovet brothers in 1948, but two years later, watch manufacturing with the Bovet name ceased. F-L sold the brand name and the facilities in 1966 to a watchmaking co-operative.

Fortunately, salvation and stability were near. Following what should be called by future generations 'The Great Watch Renaissance of the 1980s', the notion of Bovet's revival caught

the imagination of Fleurier's greatest champion: Michel Parmigiani. After all, Bovet was one of the village's earliest and most important houses. In 1989, Parmigiani Fleurier purchased Bovet and registered the trademark for 'all watchmaking products, mechanical watches and clocks and naval instruments, of Swiss origin', but no new Bovet-branded timepieces were produced.

## Finding a home

In 1994, with his own, eponymous brand occupying his time, Michel passed the baton to Roger Guye and Thierry Oulevay, who quickly appreciated what a treasure Bovet was: they unveiled a new line of Bovet watches in 1997 at the Basel watch fair, eventually winning a handful of awards. They also produced a model indicative of what Bovet could offer clients in the 21st century: an exquisite pocket watch called the 'Fleurier', which could be worn as a wristwatch. A clever feature - another Bovet tradition - was a winder at 12 o'clock, with its protective bow providing the perfect opportunity for attaching a watchstrap.

Guye and Oulevay ran Bovet until 2001, when the pair sold the majority shares - and eventually the balance - to the current keeper of the Bovet flame, Pascal Raffy. Like Parmigiani, Guye and Oulevay, Raffy is thoroughly cognizant of the responsibility he has undertaken, and the reputation he has to protect. An inveterate collector who was dazzled by a Bovet he received in 2000, Raffy was fascinated by its unique case, the concept of a pocket watch to be worn on the wrist, the bow at 12 o'clock, the exquisite workmanship.

Raffy, now the owner and President of Bovet Fleurier SA, set about reviving Bovet with a thoroughness that has eluded too many reincarnations. A pre-eminent aspect of the resurrection is the emphasis on Bovet's association with Fleurier, now a burgeoning watch centre thanks to Parmigiani, Chopard, Richemont's Valflourier facility and the Fleurier Seal. *Manufacture* status is a given, Raffy insisting on vertical integration

Miniature painting on mother-of-pearl calls for exceptionally sharp eyes and dextrous hands. To complete a single dial, the painter spends an average of 40 hours, peering attentively through the binocular magnifier.





(Above) Bovet's spiritual home, Château de Môtiers ©picswiss.ch (Above right) Bovet maintains its heritage with an authentic Artisan Haute Horlogerie watchmaking workshop. Located in the Château, the workshop is thoroughly modern with a constant controlled atmosphere that is hermetically sealed. (Below) Sportster Chronograph with self-winding movement, featuring 44mm blued case and navy blue dial.



Mille Fleurs, Bovet Fleurier, circa 1840. A gold and enamel watch, set with split pearls. Cover decorated with polychrome champlevé enamel floral and foliate patterns. Movement with Chinese duplex escapement.



and independence, in order to allow Bovet to flourish.

Among the elements that compose the operation are the actual watchmaking atelier as well as a dial and gem-setting factory. Both fall under the name DIMIER 1738, with Manufacture de Haute Horlogerie Artisanale, located in Tramelan, for the development of tourbillons, and Manufacture de Cadrons et de Sertissage, located in Plan-les-Ouates, in Geneva, housing the dial crafting and precious stone setting workshops. Over 100 artisans and craftsmen create the watches with the Bovet name.

Unexpectedly, another piece fell into place, amplifying the purity and authenticity of the venture. Again by sheer 'not-coincidence', the Castle Of Môtiers, built in the 13th century, was available for acquisition. Located in Môtiers, the oldest village in the Val-de-Travers region, the Château was donated in 1957 by the descendants of Henri-François Du Bois-Bovet to the canton of Neuchâtel. Raffy purchased the Château, completing the transaction on 29 March 2007.

As the company so romantically puts it: "The story began one Friday 13th like an amorous encounter, a case of love at first sight as Pascal Raffy discovered the historic monument perched like an eagle's nest above the village of Fleurier, the original home of the Bovets." This

enabled Raffy to provide Bovet with an inextricable and legitimate physical link to its past: a return to its birthplace. Bovet uses this prestigious site for its artisan watchmaking workshops, and it will be the administration hub of the entire BOVET 1822 group, with one of its towers, the Diesse, set aside as a museum open to visitors. It will display Bovet's private collection of its antique 19th-century pocket watches.

### A new line

With astonishing rapidity, Raffy has created a catalogue containing three families of watches, all immediately recognisable as Bovets - even the less formal Sportster line. This range includes chronographs and tourbillons, but their look is cleaner, less ornate than the more traditional models. The 44mm Chronograph, in blue and black, with big date, manages to balance perfectly the Bovet form with the look of current sporting watches: oozing with the clues of its heritage, yet as current as a Big Bang or a Nautilus.

Purists will be drawn to the Fleurier and Fleurier Complications models, the former being time-only editions but exhibiting an array of aesthetic touches that have become Bovet specialties: miniature paintings on enamel or mother-of-pearl, flinqués, engraved champlevés, artistically-set precious stones and pearls. The latter range adds that which are closest to Raffy's heart: complications, like the name says.



Collection Dimier Récital 5.



The Récital 5 movement.

Edouard Bovet (1797-1849)  
a forerunner in exploiting the  
Chinese market.

Among the in-house designs are tourbillons, perpetual calendars, retrogrades, minute repeaters, GMTs, including a minute repeater tourbillon with automaton. Every component is hand-finished and decorated according to criteria established by the highest standards of *haute horlogerie*.

While only slightly more conventional, in that they have four 'horns' for the fitting of conventional straps, the Dimier range's models also include complicated specialties, like the new 46mm Recital 5. It offers power-reserve at 12 o'clock, 20-seconds tourbillon and big date, exquisitely detailed dials and cases and hardware made of a mix of exotic materials; the bezels, backs, pushers and crowns, for example, are available in grey gold or rose gold, while the case is available in rose or white gold with titanium case sides. The openwork dial is made of onyx and rock crystal.

But it's another new development for Bovet that encapsulates this 'perfect storm'. Everything has fallen into place for a complete revival of one of the forgotten greats, a litany of events conspiring to re-establish the brand: the availability of the family's château; the fact that it was one of the first companies selling into China and it's back just in time for the recent rebirth of that market; the maintaining of *manufacture* status by acquiring two ailing suppliers; the birth of the Fleurier Seal and Pascal Raffy's role as a member of its committee; a company tradition able to address the newly-revived passion for enamel. But one

other trend, which also owes much to Bovet, and to Fleurier itself, will draw out all manner of 'circle of life' analogies. And they will be neither forced conceits nor mere hippie mutterings.

Chopard is a neighbour of Bovet, Parmigiani a key figure in its recent past. They - and a handful of others - have addressed the current craze for pocket watches by reviving a tradition from the period when pocket watches and wristwatches met head on: the adaptable pocket watch. Chopard launched their stunning entry at this year's Basel event, while Parmigiani Fleurier cleverly designed the dash clock for the new Bugatti Galibier to be removable for wrist or pocket wear, or for nightstand duty.

Enter Bovet's sublime Amadeo range, reminiscent of the Fleurier that captivated Raffy a decade ago. Seen on the wrist, it's clearly a Bovet, whether one of the tourbillons or the elegant time-only models with small seconds. But remove its strap, and it can serve as a pocket watch, a table clock, a pendant watch, a kimono watch, a brooch watch, a dashboard watch or as a reversible wristwatch showing either the movement or a miniature painting.

It's all in place for Bovet. On the wrist, in the pocket and just about anywhere else. And, with the opening of New Bond Street's Kronometry earlier this year, the brand is set to have a flourishing presence in the UK. ☺

Antique Bovet Certificate.

