



Did you hear the one about the Swiss manufacture that stopped producing mechanical watches to focus entirely on quartz movements? No, this is not another one of those horological horror stories from the Seventies, when even the most august brands were racing to embrace the silicon age; this is Ventura, who, 17 years after designing its first quartz piece (now a part of the permanent collection at the Museum Of Modern Art) this year announced it would dispose of its last remaining mechanical pieces in a series of limited editions to focus instead on the fast-developing high-end digital watch market. In this, Ventura has stolen something of a march by billing itself as Switzerland's first 'Manufacture Electronique'.

Bill Prince

(Above) Ventura CEO Pierre Nobs (left) discussing the new v-tec Sigma with its designer, Paolo Fancelli, who joins a long line of notable Ventura collaborators, which includes the legendary typographer Adrian Frutiger and industrial designer Hannes Wettstein. (Right) The new v-tec Sigma driving watch (£1,150), whose width spans an epic 59 mm. Graceful proportions belie such proportions though, sitting across the wrist comfortably, with the LCD display angled for easy legibility whilst gripping the steering wheel.



Chips With Everything



(Above) The auto-winding Sparc rx (£1,100) was designed by Ventura's latest hired gun, Paolo Fancelli. The watch face revolves, allowing the wearer to align the time with his or her optimal vision, rather than twisting their wrist.

(Below) The latest generation of Ventura and Hannes Wettstein's v-tec range, Delta (from £650) offers a slightly more organic interpretation of Alpha's stark, angular lines. The Durinox case - a hardened and scratch-resistant stainless steel - is also available in matte black.

In quoting that 'manufacture' status to which all luxury watch marques aspire, Pierre Nobs' *manufacture electronique* smacks slightly of marketing device, but it is an honorific that nonetheless declaims not only on the virtues of its timepieces (of which there are many) but the inherent value of a technology that until recently has been caught between the resurgent and inwardly investing Swiss mechanical watch industry, and the high-volume-oriented output of its Japanese proponents.

Still, with the reputation of the digital watch not so much out in the cold as left in the shade, Founder and CEO Pierre Nobs, 62, has helped rehabilitate a technology that has suffered from 30 years of under-investment and over-production.

With everyone from TAG Heuer to Linde Werdelin working to reacquaint quartz with quality, it's a bold and timely strategy, but one that still suffers from comparison with the high-end market in mechanical movements - a field that continues to define both Swiss watchmaking and the idea of a 'premium' timepiece. So it is pleasing to see Ventura's range acting as a rebuttal to both, highlighting its high-end 'designer' approach to watchmaking. Ventura produces dynamic-looking pieces that are large without being loud, modern without appearing futuristic, and - most importantly - hi-tech without being intimidating.

All four series further distance themselves from 'digitales diabolique' by eschewing countless quartz-friendly functions in favour of simple complications more attuned to the consumer of high-end timepieces. However, the movements and cases, designed and constructed at Ventura's Zurich atelier, do offer innovations: the Sparc series boasts the world's first self-winding solid-state movement, while the v-tec models - including this autumn's stonking (59 mm) v-tec Sigma - features the patented 'EasySkroll' mechanical navigation system.

From the outset

Apple's Jonathan Ive has said that when he was designing the iPod he felt it should have a sense of "a lot going on beneath that white skin", and it's a similar sense of 'substance in the pursuit of style' that Ventura's tickless and tockless timepieces exhibit so successfully. A fact Nobs is keen to highlight:

"What we are doing here is incomparably more intensive than for a company with traditional mechanical watches," he explains on the phone from Zurich. "Because these companies are buying their movements from established sources - or from one established source, to be blunt - R&D is practically non-existent. Whereas we are virtually doing everything from scratch."

So what is at the heart of Ventura's watchmaking?

"It starts with software; with thinking 'what would make a consumer happy in terms of functions?' How these functions should be interfaced with the user electronically; how certain things should be functioning from a user's point of view. Then it goes on to actually implementing these ideas electronically, which is a job on its own. And then of course to design - not the product itself first of all, but a movement that integrates all these things..."

It's interesting that Nobs uses terms such as 'movement'. Is he, in effect, trying to 'premiumise' his core technology?



(Left) Front and rear views of the battery-powered VEN_04 calibre made by Ventura and used for the v-tec Sigma and v-tec Delta models. Its functions are operated by the EasySkroll system, using the fluted crown protruding from the top.

"Well, we tried to use 'module' in the past, but nobody seemed to understand what we meant," explains Nobs. "So we went back to the term 'movement'. Having said that, when you look at our latest product, the v-tec Sigma or the old Alpha, you will notice that the interface to use the function - what we call the 'EasySkroll' - is a mechanical device. So it's not just a printed circuit board; it has a complex interface, which is far superior to any other way of handling the multiple functions of a digital watch."

Value, not gadgetry

However, given the possibilities with quartz movement, Nobs is adamant that, in keeping with his watches' sleek lines, functions will always follow form. Indeed, ever since Ventura's inception, Nobs has been helped by a worthy procession of luminaries from the design world. Flemming Bo Hansen's 'Watch' made MoMA's permanent collection in New York, and legendary typographer Adrian Frutiger even invented a 'Ventura' font for one of collaborator Hannes Wettstein's watch dials. Nobs' latest recruit is Swiss industrial designer Paolo Fancelli, whose tenure at Ventura follows such sparkling CV fodder as designing a Wenger Swiss Army knife and conceptualising some electric secateurs. Presumably Ventura benefits from design so informed of everyday utility?

"We want to develop an adequate, non-specialised, modern timepiece for ordinary people who appreciate precision, reliability and certain functionalities," he says. "So we keep away from the bells and whistles. It's not a gadget where you would implement the wow functions, like Casio are doing in their price area. So we stay away from any area that has to do with health, like blood pressure, because this is taken care of by other brands already, again in the low price area. We also don't want to develop anything that is too much to do with sports."

But what they may lack in complications, Nobs' watches more than make up for in credibility. "Longevity is very important to us," attests Nobs. "And our special materials, Durinox and Titanox, are both relatively heavy in comparison to cheaper materials."

"But the perception is still that a mechanical watch has a higher value than a digital watch. This is one of our biggest problems. So we say that there is no difference - in terms of value - between a mechanical movement and a digital movement. For instance, our automatic digital movement costs more than a Valjoux 7750. Part of the reason is that the 7750 is produced in much higher quantities, but it's also because we have exactly the same elements of precision, and most of the parts that we use are of a much higher value in themselves than in a mechanical watch."

(Below) An upcoming project, the v-tec MGS will have the same features as the v-tec Sigma, but instead of a lithium battery, its microcircuitry will have a similar power source to the Sparc range - a visible rotor. On the market from the end of 2006.





(Above) Sharing a similar shape but smaller proportions to the v-tec Alpha, the Miss-V attempts an effeminate interpretation of Ventura's stark modernism. (Above, with Durinox case and diamonds, £2,700; top, with vermeil case and snake strap, £750.)

"But as far as the perception of value goes, I think the mechanical watch has had its peak. Ten, fifteen years ago, a tourbillon was an absolute rarity. There were maybe a handful of companies that were doing tourbillons. Now it's tenfold, and the prices have gone overboard. It's simply idiotic, because a tourbillon can be produced relatively cheaply nowadays, and it still works. So the problem is not to give value to our product, because the value is there. The problem is all these brands selling mechanical watches for a price that is outrageous. And I think that in the end the consumer is very intelligent, and he's not going to take that forever."

Swiss Made

Still, the irony of Nobs operating in the heart of an industry where the perception of 'Swiss Made' is very different to the technology it is advocating is not lost: "You can't change what you are. I'm thoroughly Swiss. I have worked for 30 years in an area that is entirely Swiss. And I think most of what you associate with 'Swissness' is positive things like precision, like reliability. In other words, I have no problem with being associated with being Swiss. And it was very much on our mind when we decided that we would become the first *manufacture electronique* in Switzerland; to be a company that uses all the positive Swiss attributes in producing a quality product, but at the same time being apart from the crowd by doing - in terms of technology - modern products."

And the decision to stop producing traditionally watches entirely? For Nobs, it came down to an overwhelming sense of, well, *boredom*... "The watch industry is absolutely stagnant; practically all of the popular movements of today were developed between the Fifties and the Seventies. And excluding the handful of manufactures who are doing their own movements, 95% buy their movement from ETA."

"This was for me the decisive factor to stop. It cannot be a life-fulfilling job to occupy oneself dressing up Mr Hayek's movements. We did it for a while, because when we started to use mechanical movements in the middle of the Nineties, very few companies were using modern designs around these established movements, and we initiated certain fashions. We participated in giving cool and functional looks to the watches. And then after a few years our competitors started to use the same design elements, which made our product looks less and less distinctive. And we couldn't beat that system because we were using the same movements as everybody else. So, since we always kept our foot in the digital watch market, this gave us many more possibilities."

And what is to become of the few mechanical movements that survive Ventura's switch to solid-state circuitry? "Right now we have one mechanical series, that's the Frutiger," explains Nobs. "It's a beautiful movement, nicely designed and we have about 50 pieces left. We are now preparing the second series because the first one is practically sold out. So toward the end of the year we will bring the next of those we have."

And when those have gone, Ventura will never venture back into mechanical movements? "That's right. Originally we wanted to just chuck the material away and good riddance. But then we saw so many people who said, 'No, please!' So we're doing it. It's good for the brand as well. We can say that the same diligence applies to those traditional pieces as we are now applying to the electronic timepieces." ◯

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Further information: UK distribution of Ventura is handled by Classic Time, Tel: 01189 482 674, www.classic-time.co.uk, www.ventura.ch



(Right) VM 21.07 is one of just four mechanical Ventura references that remain on sale - of which less than 60 pieces remain for each (€2,900). Based on a Unitas movement, these 'Frutiger' watches' dials and even font were designed exclusively by the eponymous typographer - famous for the Frutiger font and Swiss highways' typeface.

(Below) The mechanically powered digital VEN_99 calibre, whose battery is charged by the wearer's arm movements using a centrifugal rotor. This in-house movement is found in the entire Sparc range.