

# Shadow Watchmaker

## Christophe Claret: master of chiming watches by appointment

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It is wonderful what being the head of a prestigious watch brand does to your ego. The easy profits, the fawning bimbos, the glamour, the celebrities - you're a renaissance prince. As such, you command the Da Vincis of watchmaking to glorify your taste, your vision and your history. And no one does this better than Christophe Claret. If you have the money, he will pile complication upon complication to realise your fantasy. All you do is add your signature and you're the creator. *QP* treads the hallowed corridors of Claret HQ alongside the shy genius, and is granted a rare peak at a world-renowned factory as famous for its innovation as its secrecy.

Christophe Claret plays the game by the cardinal Swiss-industry rule - there are no famous watchmakers in Switzerland, only famous brands. However talented you think you are, stick your head above the parapet of anonymity and you will be shot down. Ask him the names of his illustrious clients and his lips are zipped; don't ask him

and you soon find out. The watch catalogue left carelessly in the reception of his headquarters in Le Locle bristles with bookmarks, revealing countless Claret products branded by some of the most prestigious *manufactures*.

Originally from Lyons in France, Claret only creates watches at the

top of the hierarchy of complications, retailing for US\$200,000 or more. His standard escapement is the tourbillon, but he will only produce them as part of another complication, preferably a minute repeater. And the clients he likes best are those who commission complications that haven't been attempted before in a wristwatch.



(Left) Christophe Claret's horological education started at the age of 16, at Ecole d'horlogerie in Geneva, later completing his practical training at a 'cabinotier's cabinet', where he was initiated with complicated watches. His first big order came at Baselworld 1987, from Ulysse Nardin, and his company was created two years later. (Above) From 2004, the Opus 4 - the fourth of Harry Winston Rare Timepieces' annual collaborations with a master watchmaker. Christophe Claret's contribution to the series (so far boasting such luminaries as FP Journe and Vianney Halter) shows-off what he does best - chiming movements. One can also flip from the 'technical' face shown to the reverse 'romantic' moonphase face, requiring a mechanism that reverses the hands.





(Right) Le Soleil d'Or has been Christophe Claret SA's headquarters since 1998 - a stately manor house built ca 1860 above Le Locle. Attached is Claret's brand new, state-of-the-art manufacture.

(Left) Technicians at work on Claret's cutting-edge machines (no pun intended).

(Below) Claret consults with the design department, where his clients' ideas and concepts are developed on-screen into workable movements.



### Tooled up

Such was his first patron, in 1987. Rolf Schnyder, who had just acquired Ulysse Nardin, dreamed of a chiming wristwatch with striking jacks performing on the dial. Claret got the job, and delivered the production-ready model two-and-a-half years ahead of schedule. "I had the very latest computer-aided design software of the time," the master reveals.

From then on, technological superiority has been a core strategy of his growing business. Animated virtual mechanisms worthy of a Hollywood production appear on the screens of his design department. With nerdy enthusiasm, design engineers talk you through the elaborate sequence of levers, springs and wheels that turn the impossible demands of Claret's clients into working reality. His workshops have machine tools that branded *manufactures* only dream of, including the only laser cutter in

(Left) The Opus 4 features two 'cathedral' gongs, more than one case circumference long, giving a deeper resonance. The hours strike on one lower-tone gong, the quarters are indicated by double tones struck on both gongs and the number of minutes that have elapsed since the last quarter-hour strike on the higher-tone gong.

the watch industry. It cuts out steel parts to micron tolerances 50 times faster than the latest spark-erosion machine, leaving a surface so smooth you could run it across your eyeball. Uniquely, Claret is able to machine bridges and baseplates out of sapphire crystal to create tourbillons that appear to float on air.

He is equally proud of his screws - each a gleaming spiral jewel, flawless under 10-times magnification, and far superior, he assures me, than anything produced by the industry. In fact, the only 'off-the-peg' component in any Claret watch is the balance-spring. But, says Claret, the Swatch Group will not be able to repeat its action of 2001 when the Nivarox-Far monopoly restricted its supply of balance springs. Like many other *manufactures*, Claret already has an alternative source lined up.

### Interesting chimes

After the success of Ulysse Nardin's automaton repeaters, Dr Ludwig Oechslin got all the glory from his association with the brand while Claret remained anonymous and got the business. His discretion was swiftly rewarded with orders for super-watches from such brands as Breguet, Girard-Perregaux, Cartier, Corum, Parmigiani, de Grisogono/Chopard and the "master of complications" himself, Franck Muller.

Unlike many movement-makers, Claret insists on making, assembling and casing up the entire watch. Leaving complicated movements - especially minute repeaters - to the skills of the brands' master watchmakers is too risky, apparently. But surely, with no contact from the marque itself, this significantly separates the product from its all-important 'brand DNA', to use the lingo. "Our creations are always coherent with the brand's history and identity," reassures Claret. "We thoroughly research each brand we work for, and often know more about the brand than our client does!"

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With tourbillons now commonplace, minute repeaters are today the essential justification for adding a couple of zeros to the price of the watch, and Claret has made them the house speciality. He produced his first in 1990 and has since developed acoustically tuned cathedral gongs that wrap twice around the movement, three-gong 'carillons' (chromatic chiming mechanisms), and even Westminster chimes on four gongs (the four-note 'Big Ben' tune). He is also the only manufacturer providing water-resistant cases for minute repeaters, so you can spot a Claret repeater just from its '30 m water resistance' specification.

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(Left) Client collaboration: Pierre Koukjian (left) from deLaCour discusses his Bitourbillon project with Claret in Le Locle. (Below) At work on the Bitourbillon movement, developed and manufactured entirely chez Claret. (Above) Koukjian's completed brainchild, with two flying tourbillons and jumping-hour displays for two time-zones (from SFr.550,000).



(Above-right and right) Girard-Perregaux's Opera Three (SFr.545,000) uses a mechanism developed originally by Claret for an unsuccessful self-branded watch. The movement is composed of a miniature keyboard with 20 tonal 'tines' or blades strummed by a drum furnished with some 150 pins. A selector makes it possible to choose between two different melodies, by shifting the drum sideways. The melodies can be personalised on request - within the given 20 notes of course!





#### Westminster chimes:

First quarter: mi re do sol

Half-hour: do mi re sol do re mi do

Third quarter: mi do re sol sol re mi do mi re do sol

Hour: do mi re sol do re mi do mi do re sol sol re mi do



(Above) Bovet's minute repeater with reverse hand fitting (SFr.490,000, excl. VAT). Displaying the minute repeater and tourbillon side-by-side on the face involved inverting Claret's movement and subsequently reversing the hands so they turned clockwise dial-side.

(Left) One of very few projects upon which Claret has stamped his name is Jean Dunand, principal brand of World Premiere Watchmaking - a collaboration between Claret and industry veteran Thierry Oulevay. The first release was last year's Tourbillon Orbital, which featured a tourbillon that rotated around the movement with the barrel once an hour. The caseband's 'fuel pump' power reserve is visible here too.

themselves. The musical watch is now properly marketed by Girard-Perregaux as the Opera Three, alongside two other Claret creations, Operas One and Two, and now commands the respect and recognition it always deserved.

#### Reaping the rewards

Claret is however developing his own brand by proxy, having gone into partnership with Thierry Oulevay to market his most extraordinary complications under the Jean Dunand brand (see Issue 14). The first venture, an orbiting tourbillon, is to be followed by a watch even more astonishing. A preview of the project - under an oath of secrecy - shows Claret stretching horological possibilities to their limits.

More recently, the profile of Claret's customers has started to change. New or revived brands, such as Bovet, deLaCour, Delaneau or Cedric Johner, anxious to play at the high-stakes table, turned to Claret for watchmaking credibility. And they, like Harry Winston for whom he created the reversible Opus 4 in 2004, are proud to acknowledge his co-operation.

(Above) The first of three striking watches made for Girard-Perregaux by Claret was the Opera One (SFr. 480,000), a four-gong 'Westminster' repeater complete with G-P's trademark Tourbillon with Three Gold Bridges. Three of the four notes are marked on the carillon's hammers: 'sol', 'do', 're'. 'Mi' is hidden behind the dial at 11 o'clock.

(Right) Claret's first client was Rolf Schnyder, who commissioned an ongoing series of striking 'automaton' watches for his newly acquired brand Ulysse Nardin in 1987 - otherwise known as 'jaquemarts', featuring small figurines on the dial that perform an action while the repeater is chiming, usually as if generating the sound. This minute repeater in platinum made by Christophe Claret (€181,000) features three jacks hammering bells, which makes it easy to distinguish the quarters from the minutes. Limited to 18 pieces.

The pair of Porsches parked in front of the expensively restored manor house overlooking the watchmaking town of Le Locle, and the gleaming manufacturing plant next door, proclaim the rewards of working in the shadows. The young men fooling around with a ball during their break give the Christophe Claret headquarters a campus atmosphere. Cradle-snatched from the watch schools, they work in a demanding environment, spurred on by the irrepressible enthusiasm of their boss.

Today, the facility employs 90 people, including 40 watchmakers, producing around 500 watches a year. His only serious rival is fellow Le Locle resident Renaud et Papi - another bespoke *fournisseur haute horlogerie*, owned by Audemars Piguet. But for now, Claret's future looks bright, with as many as 15 new projects currently in development, some of which will go on to 2012. We shall just have to wait a little longer to see who will step away from the limelight and into his shadow as heir to the most discreet tailor in horology. ○

Further information: [www.claret.ch](http://www.claret.ch)



His proudest achievement is a musical wristwatch that plays a choice of Mozart or Tchaikovsky in passing on the hour, or on demand. It's an exquisite little mechanism with 20 tines strummed by a rotating pin-drum that shifts sideways to engage the pattern of pins for the selected tune. However, Claret did the unthinkable: he signed them with his own name. The project flopped. The moral of this story being that 'fournisseurs' - suppliers to the brands - should never attempt to become brands