

# Perfect Pitch

## Villemont hits all the right notes

Maria Doultou



(Above) The current flagship watch of Olivier Müller's fledgling brand Villemont is this, the 'Vltime' (SFr.26,000 excl. VAT) - the first of a new Spirit of Artisans collection, which will re-interpret the 'Aston R' collection's round case this spring. Vltime's case is made of a new alloy called Vltimum. Its meteorite dial bears a circular 'cartridge' motif that mirrors the interior micro-rotor. (Opposite page) From Villemont's new steel range, the tonneau-cased Aston T (left) with La Joux-Perret split-seconds column-wheel chronograph and power reserve movement (SFr.13,000 excl. VAT) and the round Aston R GMT and alarm, also with La Joux-Perret movement (SFr.8,360 excl. VAT).

ⓘ A visit to the smaller and lesser-known brands at Baselworld is always rewarding. Exit the Hall of Dreams past the Goliaths' multi-storey marble palaces and cross into the Hall of Emotions. Here, the Davids of the watch world do battle from matchbox-sized booths and offer coffee in paper cups along with their latest micro-brand gambits. Villemont was tucked away in the furthest corner, making its eventual discovery all the more satisfying. This blossoming brand's perfectly judged watches could be the best find of the year.

"It is a tough business," remarks Olivier Müller, founder of Geneva-based Villemont. Playing with the disassembled case of the 'Vltime' model, made up of three silky smooth metal pieces that slip together effortlessly, Müller continues: "People are becoming more critical of new brands but I still think there are many niches to be taken. I realised I couldn't do what Jean-Claude Biver did when he revived the historic brand Blancpain as there aren't many old brands with an interesting history left that don't cost a fortune. So we started from scratch.

As the light catches the white-metal sheen of Vltime's engraved bezel, the black dial with its applied pink-gold index wheel comes alive. The contours of the guilloché's elongated Vs are as rich as the darkest chocolate. It is the sum of these quirky, finely honed details that make this a handsome and unusual piece of wrist candy; as distinctive as any watch you will find in the main hall of Baselworld, yet not completely off the radar of traditional watch aesthetics.

"The market conditions of the early Nineties, when brands like Franck Muller were getting off the ground, do not exist anymore because today the traditional brands are competing in niches previously left to the smaller brands. In those days, Patek Philippe weren't making the Twenty-4 and there was no Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Offshore Concept watch. Also there are so many new brands. Only last year 15 new high-end brands were launched - some of which have already disappeared. However, I think that people are becoming more interested in the details of real watchmaking and this is where I am going."

And to prove his point, Müller brings out the hero of his collection, the Vltimum - a limited edition of 28 watches made out of a new alloy called Vltimum. "One of the trends that I have noticed is the interest in developing new materials and sourcing vanguard metals. When we came to design the Vltimum, I remembered a very pure material from my former job at Metalor SA," explains Müller. "It is a mixture of palladium, ruthenium and platinum and it is the first ever watch made of this metal. We have a gentleman's agreement by which I maintain exclusivity of use for the next few years."





(Above) The Aston R dual-time chrono' caseband, demonstrating Villemont's assiduous attention to detail. Note the 'V' shape of the pushbuttons and the 'V' contours of the crown.

(Below) Man with a plan: Olivier Müller has taken the bull by its horns and created a luxury brand from virtually nothing, with admirable results. One cannot deny the integrity and value of his products, backed by a believable and trustworthy brand.

### Product value

Boss of a staff numbering three (one of whom is his wife), Müller's dream is that Villemont – currently producing a few hundred watches a year – be recognised as an alternative to big names such as Panerai, Jaeger-LeCoultre or Audemars Piguet. "I really don't mean to sound arrogant, but I would love to gain my place next to these brands and be producing around 30,000 watches a year," says Müller. "Enshallah..."

For all the dreaming and god willing, Müller still has his feet firmly on the ground. Sharp of suit and refreshingly straight-talking, this 40-year-old MBA graduate started his career in the very real world of control and logistics at L'Oreal. He then went to Omega, where he was in charge of worldwide distribution and logistics. Product development, trouble shooting and delivering the goods were big parts of his job and here, according to Müller, he gained valuable insight into "how to made products just so; what works and what the market wants." Going one step back in the production process, he then moved to Metalor SA, a Swiss supplier of watch cases in precious metals and new alloys for the likes of Rolex, Vacheron Constantin and Vertu mobile phones.

Next on his CV was Chopard, where he was principally in charge of procurement. However, Müller also became involved in developing new products, from the elite LUC manufacture to the house's first plastic watch, Be Mad (see p.87). "Here I learnt the intrinsic value of products," he comments, "but in the evenings I was working on my own business plan."

Müller took the plunge and in 2005, Villemont SA presented itself to the competitive world of watchmaking. The house style is all about detail, and a Swiss-German rigour drives the look of the watches: "I am more A Lange & Söhne than, say, Technomarine. The look is classical but with a difference. Our designs are pure and clean and

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(Left) Aston T selfwinding big date in 18 ct yellow gold, set with 42 diamonds (SFr.25,000 excl. VAT). All time-and-date Villemont watches are currently based on the ETA 2896 calibre. In this model, the rotor of the base calibre has been replaced with a 22 ct engraved gold substitute. (Right) Two distinctly feminine offerings on display at Baselworld this year were the delicate Lady V in steel with diamond indexes and satin strap (SFr.9,200 excl. VAT) and the satin-strapped Aston T big date with diamond lugs (SFr.27,000 excl. VAT). The latter's sapphire caseback reveals a 22 ct yellow-gold rotor.



where I like to put the complications is within the case, which is made from three different parts, and the dial."

### Form and function

As with any brand looking to stand out, being different is important to Villemont, which is why it has shunned the tourbillon craze and instead opted for useful functions such as split-second chronographs, alarms and dual-time complications. "Anyone can go to Christophe Claret and buy the mechanism, but I don't need to be a copycat."

The watches, grouped into three families are the round-cased Aston R, the tonneau Aston T family (both named after his favourite car brand) and the Lady V ladies' collection. The pioneer collection launched in 2005 and now in stores is all gold, but this year Müller hopes that the introduction of stainless steel models will raise the number of watches produced.

The watches themselves are all reassuringly weighty and on the chunky side, walking the fine line between classic and contemporary. They don't jump out like a Roger Dubuis, nor are they precious-looking *haute horlogerie* darlings, but they certainly don't melt into the blur of watches at Baselworld. Details such as the use of the new alloys, bold use of the colour

orange, multi-layered dials with an original 'Clou de Villemont' guilloché, applied indexes and the woven-in 'V' motif on the crown, dial and even the tips of the hands make a handsome collection of watches with true 'zing'.

Inside, the practical yet fastidious approach continues. "The Vltime uses a VM 106 vintage movement, which was produced by the Büren manufacture in 1967," reveals Müller. "This calibre was developed with a micro-rotor to make an automatic movement that was thinner than ones with central rotors and it was later used as the basic calibre for the famous chronograph calibres 11 and 12 (see Collecting, p.67). The Büren manufacture disappeared in the Seventies, but Patek Philippe and, later on, Chopard kept the principle of the micro-rotor. We have disassembled the movements to redecorate the bridge with black gold and all the other parts are set in red-gold, to match the colours of the dial. We changed the micro-rotor to one in 950 platinum and it is engraved with the Clou de Villemont. I aim to pick up one interesting old movement a year."

### Filling its niche

So, any chance of a new movement? "We are currently working on a Villemont calibre, but I don't want to talk about this yet as I am Swiss-German and want to be sure it is really working first!





(Left) Computer rendition of the Aston R dual-time chrono' in steel (SFr.7,900 excl. VAT), containing the VM 101 calibre, based on a La Joux-Perret ébauche. Self-winding movement, decorated with Côtes de Genève finish. (Right) In Villemont's garish orange signature colour, the Aston R split-seconds chrono' with power reserve in steel (SFr.12,000 excl. VAT). Here, the brand's trademark 'Clou de Villemont' guilloché dial is well demonstrated.

**“The Vtime uses a VM 106 vintage movement, produced by the Büren manufacture in 1967... I aim to pick up one interesting old movement a year.”**

For our other watches, we use one basic movement - a reliable big-date ETA 2896. The alarm, column-wheel chronograph, dual-time and alarm watches house La Joux-Perret movements, which are very well respected.” The Lady V watches all have quartz movements and follow similar design criteria to the men's models with the addition of engraved mother-of-pearl dials and original asymmetrical gem setting.

So much for the product, but who exactly will be buying these watches? “As a new brand we are looking to work with new people. For example, in Dubai we are not with the traditional, established watch distributor. Instead, we have the Al Tayer Group who distributes a range of brands from Bottega Veneta to luxury cars. In Madrid, we are going to open with a brand-new

niche watch brand store. I think that jewellers are becoming more open to the idea of having niche brands alongside the well-known names. With the big brands cutting margins, opening too many new doors and developing their own boutique networks, it is one of the few ways the vendors can differentiate themselves.

“Some days though,” reveals Müller candidly, “I wake up thinking I really should not have done all this!” But despite his early morning wobbles, Villemont is far from being a stab in the dark or an ivory tower fantasy; rather, a carefully plotted and thorough business plan with a solid, well-thought-out product. With such design flair, integrity, plus that optimistic corporate colour, the future's bright. ○