

Forty three years on, and still turning heads: Rado's update of its legendary scratchproof 'DiaStar' watch, The Original (Classic model pictured; large, £595; XL, £650). An automatic ETA 2824-2 movement is inside.

Schnitt B-B



Up To Scratch

Rado's DiaStar Original was not only the world's first scratchproof watch; it was an iconic slice of 1960s cool, and the springboard from which Rado launched itself as an enduring innovator in hi-tech materials. The Original's new reincarnation bears only slight improvements to the 1962 design, reminding us how truly classic the first DiaStar was. And it's not just the unflagging worldwide sales that have perpetuated this model over the decades - our conversation with CEO Roland Streule soon revealed a genuine fondness and enthusiasm for his oval oddball.

Maria Doulton

"You either love it or you hate it," says Roland Streule, CEO of Rado. "It is probably on a par with the Rolex Oyster as one of the most successful single product styles." He is of course referring to the brand's watershed DiaStar Original model.

The DiaStar Original of 1962 was the world's first scratchproof watch, with styling that spoke of the days of Captain Kirk's command at the bridge of the *Enterprise* and all the associated retro-futurist gadgetry. From its status as an *avant-garde* watch, it was in production for the next 43 years and became the firm's global bestseller, as well as the model that set Rado's course for many more hard-material innovations - a reputation with which the brand is now synonymous. The three million DiaStar Originals sold have made its funky curves among

the most enduring timepiece designs of our times. Perhaps a victim of its own success, the DiaStar went from cutting-edge sixties inspiration to become the watch of choice from Bolivian bureaucrats to Indian engineers, occasionally veering dangerously via some ill-judged gold and diamond affairs.

And so The Original is back, complete with streamlined looks *and* streamlined name - the 'DiaStar' dial motif now relegated to a small caseback engraving. This time though, it's back not just as a workhorse, but as a design icon, finally stepping into the limelight it deserves. "It has become a classic and I like to compare it with a Le Corbusier chair or B&O equipment," comments Mr Streule, in his precise English, tinged with a slight Swiss lilt. He has been at Rado since 1978, seeing the brand through its



(Above) Roland Streule - CEO of Rado, and brand veteran, having started at the Lengnau atelier in 1978.

(Below) Rado's watershed DiaStar Original from 1962. Little has changed over the 43 years, which is testament to its enduring design - enjoying a strong revival now, because, as Rado puts it, "with the advent of the new millennium, consumers' hearts have started to beat faster to the rhythm of vintage."

acquisition by The Swatch Group in 1983 (then the newly formed SMH corporation) and its inexorable rise ever since.

The Original is key to understanding Rado and its early ventures in branded watches, as Streule is keen to explain: "The DiaStar is at the root of the success of our company and it established our design philosophy. We are not in the fashion business. Most of our product lines last decades and our aim is to create beauty that lasts. That means timeless designs and timeless materials."

Today, Rado is using the timeless lines of The Original in a strategic way to court a younger, more style-conscious consumer, and the associated retro scene. As the firm ventures further and further upmarket with its other hi-tech ceramic and diamond ranges this accessibly priced range (from £595) keeps the doors open to a wider range of clients. "As part of our Swatch Group mission, we don't want to lose our lower-price-point customer," clarifies Streule.

Birth of a legend

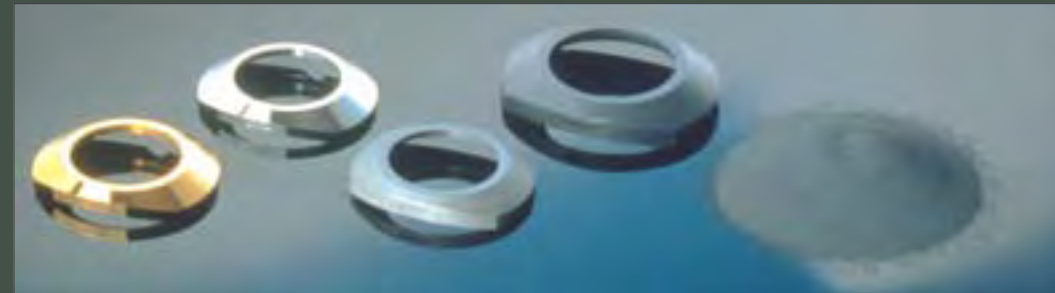
Founded in 1917 at Lengnau, near Biel, the movement assembler Schlup & Co. decided that by 1957 it had had enough with putting together watches for other companies. It wanted a watch with its own name on the dial. The Swiss family was sufficiently modest and astute not to go down the eponymous route, launching 'Rado' - a short and punchy name mercifully free of the tongue-tangling quadruple-consonant clusters.

Up until 1962, Rado was happily producing what Struele describes as "very traditional watches," but management soon realised that they needed to do something different if they were to excel. "It is tough to launch a new

(Top) In XL size only, The Original Chronograph (£750), available with a choice of three dial colour schemes. ETA 251.262 quartz movement, with ADD and SPLIT functions.

(Centre) Water-resistant to 300m, the new Original Diver (£795) features a second crown at 2 o'clock that adjusts the rotating bezel beneath the sapphire crystal - available in a choice of two different colour combinations: either in green/black/white or (pictured) red/blue/white/black.

(Bottom) Rado's rejuvenated Original Classic range promises much iteration over the coming years. This dial variant demonstrates the versatility of the design.



brand - you have to have something unique," continues Streule. "Then along came Marc Lederrey, one of our product managers. He had been visiting case factories and wondered why no one had thought of making watches out of the materials used to cut, drill and polish the cases; the metals that were stronger than the cases themselves. He became obsessed."

Great idea, but how to actually do it was a bit trickier. It is easy enough to press tungsten-carbide powder into crude blanks under a pressure of 1,000 bar and condense them into their final form in a sintering furnace at 1,450°C. But Rado needed to develop special tools to finish and polish the cases that combined the hardness of tungsten carbide and tenacity of cobalt. The solution was to make the tools out of even tougher materials, such as diamonds. The final polishing with diamond powder creates the unmistakable Rado brilliance.

"Look at any watch catalogue from 1962 and all watches were flat, with thin rims and round dials. And here comes Rado with something completely different. We didn't really fit in with our time," admits Streule, proudly. And as is the case with most enduring designs, it was a matter of form following function, with the case shape being chosen for its shock-absorbing qualities.

When it was launched, it was positioned as an expensive watch and sold for around Sfr.900. The DiaStar name alludes partly to the strength of the hard metal it is fashioned from (1350-2000 Vickers, compared to normal metal's 140-350 and the 10,000 maximum set by diamond) and also the play of light created by the deeply faceted edges of the sapphire crystal glass.

So well did this 'outside-of-the-box' thinking work, that the house has now positioned itself as the

purveyor *non plus ultra* of scratchproof watches and has added hi-tech ceramic and diamonds to its stable of favourite materials. Indeed, the house is best known today for high-tech ceramics - a 1980s invention that took over hard metal's pole position.

Endless possibilities

For all the tweaking of functions and improvement in performance, the watch remains gloriously faithful to its 1962 styling but with small technical and aesthetic improvements. These include new bracelets, a fashionable 'XL' size and greater water resistance, bringing the performance level up to the ever-increasing standards of 21st-century watchmaking.

However, one might be tempted to suspect that Rado has dusted off its hard-metal hero because ceramics are now being used so effectively by other brands. Streule is clear that Rado is not being reactive though: "It is an honour that Chanel and Versace [and recently Technomarine] are moving into hi-tech ceramic but we are still the global market leaders and we have the most experience. There is still a place for hard metal but because of its colour and shape-versatility the future is hi-tech ceramic."

Thank goodness there is a place for hard metal, as The Original is perhaps the most endearing of Rado's designs. "We are overwhelmed by its success, so we are going to carry on developing it with a smaller ladies' version and special executions such as chronometers, big dates and leather or rubber bracelets," enthuses Streule. "There are lots of possibilities!" Which is music to the ears of those who, like me, consider the DiaStar to be Rado's best design gambit to date. ○

Tungsten-carbide powder is pressed into crude blanks with a pressure of 1,000 bar (by comparison, a car tire has a pressure of around 2 bar). These are condensed into their final form in a sintering furnace at a temperature of 1,450°C. Numerous additional work operations ensue before the final polishing with diamond powder creates the unmistakable Rado brilliance. Two coating processes - CVD (Chemical Vapor Deposition) and PVD (Physical Vapor Deposition) - are used so that other colours can be realised in addition to the basic steel-coloured tone of hardmetal without impairing the brilliance or scratchproofness of the material. Apart from the steel colour, Rado now offers gold-coloured and black-coated hardmetal.

The Original Classic caseback, stamped with Rado's seahorses medallion.



Further information: Rado UK, Tel: 023 80646 800, www.rado.com