



Party Pieces

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Monday 10th October is a red-letter day for Wempe. The international watch retailer will be celebrating the 100th birthday of its associate company, Wempe Chronometerwerke, unveiling 120 specially commissioned pieces from 10 of its leading watch brands. It is with considerable excitement that the Hamburg-based Wempe family and its customers await that Monday morning when all 25 stores around the world open to reveal the fruits of several years' careful planning and collaboration. But first, a short history lesson...

The story of the House of Wempe is a long and remarkable one. Luckily, its very start has been precisely recorded. Gerhard Diedrich Wilhelm Wempe was a trained watchmaker in the German town of Elsfleth on the Weser. He founded his own business as maker and retailer in his aunt's house on 5th May 1878, with a starting capital of 80 marks no less (approximately €40). He was just 21, and within 16 years had opened his first branch in the imperial city of Oldenburg. In 1907 he had opened his 'flagship store' at the fashionable address of Schulterblatt 141 in Hamburg and over the next seven years opened four further Hamburg branches.

Chronometerwerke

Gerhard died in 1921, and his son Herbert continued his father's policy of expansion. In 1923, Herbert bought a building on Hamburg's fashionable Steinstrasse. Popularly known as "Gülden Gerd," it became the company's headquarters. Soon after,

Wempe's good connections with the Swiss watch industry finally bore fruit in 1925: the company received exclusive rights to sell the Swiss watch brands Omega, Longines, Movado and Zenith in the city of Hamburg.

In 1938, Herbert purchased the Hamburg Chronometerwerke, changing its name to Wempe Chronometerwerke. Founded back in 1905 by prominent shipowners in Hamburg and Bremen (hence this year's centenary), Chronometerwerke carried out repairs and maintenance on German merchant ships' chronometers. Once Wempe had taken over, the lion's share of turnover was earned from repairs, but there existed an annual production totalling 36 chronometers. During World War II, Wempe reluctantly expanded production to 120, building the all-in-one 'unified chronometer' in 1942 in collaboration with former competitor A Lange & Söhne in Glashütte.

Of the 10 participating brands, Nomos has marked the centenary of Wempe Chronometerwerke in the most unconventional manner, producing 100 different models, in limited editions of 100 each. Prices start at just £455, and all watches cost €100 below the price of comparable Nomos models.



(Left) Following the revival of Saxon watchmaking after Germany's reunification, Wempe was one of the first to stock A Lange & Söhne, in 1994. This Sax-O-Mat special edition is the first with a power reserve indicator (100 platinum pieces, £22,150; 100 yellow-gold pieces, £13,800). This and its dial are reminiscent of the marine chronometer Lange & Söhne and Wempe developed together in the war. (Right) Glashütte Original has specially redesigned its Senator Chronograph for Wempe's anniversary, with its manual calibre 49-11 enhanced with five screwed gold chatons, a screw balance and elegant swan-neck fine adjustment. Three editions in platinum (10 pieces; £11,250), rose gold (25 pieces; £6,950) and steel (100 pieces; £3,220).



Longines' Zeppelin Set, limited to 200 pieces, consisting of a steel wristwatch and pocket watch (£2,795). Their wooden case features a transparent window shaped like a zeppelin. Longines made the chronometer on board the first non-stop airship flight to New York in 1924.

By the end of World War II, much of Hamburg and all of Wempe lay in ruins. But all was not lost. By 1950, watchmaking at the Chronometerwerke resumed in newly furnished rooms on Hamburg's Reeperbahn, and by 1953 Wempe again had five shops in Hamburg. And again, Wempe Chronometerwerke flourished, producing 240 chronometers annually by 1955. In 1962 it produced the world's first ship's chronometer with an electric winding system. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it developed electronic master and secondary clock systems for the marine industry, becoming a leading manufacturer of ship's clock systems ever since. In 2004, the company introduced a master clock system for international timing on ships, upon which several large cruise liners now depend.

Global expansion

The shape of the company today has been largely dictated by Herbert's son Hellmut Wempe. He joined the family company in 1951, and took over its management when Herbert died in 1963. From the outset, his criteria for store locations were precisely defined: they had to be in historical buildings in the best downtown areas, to have a minimum window length of eight metres, and to possess an unmistakable ambience (which today is created by the use of the corporate colour-combination of red/anthracite/ecru).



By 1966 there were branches all over Germany and international expansion of the Wempe retailing business commenced in 1980, with a store on 5th Avenue, New York City. Stores in Paris, Vienna, London and Madrid followed and there are now 25 shops worldwide. For the past nine years, Hellmut has been running this elegant company jointly with his daughter Kim-Eva and today she has sole responsibility for the business.

Partners in time

It was natural that Wempe turned first to A Lange & Söhne for some ideas to celebrate the 100th birthday of Wempe Chronometerwerke, given the parental trading relationships established decades before and their joint production of the German Navy's standard chronometer in the 1940s. For Wempe's centenary, the Glashütte watchmakers have produced a wristwatch recalling the dial and power-reserve indicator of that marine chronometer. It comes in a wooden case, in the traditional marine chronometer style.

Of the 11 brands contributing to the centenary collection, the most interesting offering comes from Nomos. The young Glashütte manufacturer has produced not just one or two new models, but 100 individual editions, limited to 100 pieces each,

with somewhat crazy names and colours, all at very low prices. The range consists entirely of hand-wound pieces, based on the four basic models that have been developed since 1992.

Longines thought laterally with its assignment, rightly pointing out that airships need chronometers on board as much as maritime vessels. This year, the well-respected supplier to the aviation industry is presenting, through Wempe, the Zeppelin Set. Its pocket watch and wrist chronograph duo is handsomely boxed and each caseback has a Zeppelin-shaped window. Of the 11 unique pieces, this centennial set is the only one to have the Wempe name on the presentation box only - not on the timepieces themselves.

Along with contributions from the other eight 'super' brands (Audemars Piguet, Breitling, Chopard, Glashütte Original, IWC, Jaeger-LeCoultre, Panerai and Vacheron Constantin), readers can now see why the 10th October will indeed be a red-letter day for Wempe and collectors alike. But one final thought! Should anyone wish to purchase the entire centenary collection, the cost would be a mere £184,350. Given the reputation of all the brands involved, this suggestion is not without merit... ○

(Left) Breitling has contributed a special edition of its Superocean model, from the Aeromarine series, which dates back to 1957 (£1,390).

(Right) Chopard's Diver's Chronograph is the first diver's watch in its Mille Miglia series. Its characteristic maritime features include an enlarged winding crown and chronograph pusher buttons, and large time markers, in tribute to the time when ships' chronometers were used to calculate longitudinal positions. Fifty pieces in rose gold (£6,950) and 100 in steel (£2,650).