



# Luxury of Less

Chronoswiss leaves out the inessentials, in its single-minded pursuit of tradition

Maria Doultou

It has been 24 years since Gerd-Rüdiger Lang founded his reputable Chronoswiss brand in a garage in Munich. Driven by a focused philosophy characterised by Lang's obsession with the essence of mechanical watchmaking - what makes him 'tick', so to speak - a repertoire of world firsts has blossomed. With his daughter now on board as 'junior boss' and occasional watchmaker however, the brand's strict horology looks to be shaken up somewhat. This year, one can find the new Perpetual Calendar, Quarter Repeater and Chronoscope models sitting happily alongside an unlikely rainbow of garish Timemasters. *QP* talks to Lang Jr and her resolutely traditionalist father.

Natalie Lang's colourful new Timemasters span from 'noble rose' over 'bright red', 'peppermint green', 'azure blue' to 'sunny yellow' (£2,175). With matching 1970s-style strap and robust case construction, Chronoswiss watches can now enter a thus-far uncharted world of fashion and athleticism.



Gerd-Rüdiger Lang and his daughter Natalie, in their Munich manufacture. Natalie was an industrial sales representative at Mercedes-Benz AG between 1992 and 1998, before taking on various managerial tasks in sales support at Chronoswiss. From mid-2001, she completed the international Wostep program (Watchmakers of Switzerland Training and Educational Programme). To ensure that she was up to speed for her role as 'junior boss', she finished her academic studies in the autumn of 2003 with a management training course.

"It was not planned like this," says Natalie Lang almost apologetically. All blue eyes and blonde hair, she hands me an acid yellow automatic winding Timemaster on a thick leather cuff. She is referring to the new collection of brightly coloured watches she has developed at Chronoswiss.

Her father, Gerd-Rüdiger Lang, looks on with a slightly impatient air, clears his throat and re-adjusts his red-rimmed spectacles, as I begin to show more and more interest in Natalie's offerings. After all, I was at Chronoswiss's BASELWORLD stand to interview him, not his 30-year-old daughter - a recent graduate from Switzerland's Wostep school of watchmaking.

Under his hand lies a tray of his latest creations, all following the classical values and lines of traditional watchmaking, including a Chronoscope column wheel chronograph and a quarter repeater, all of which he is eager to discuss. But it is Natalie's over-sized, eye-searingly bright Timemasters that are distracting me.

Dutifully she hands the floor back to her father, but not before I could slip in a few questions about how she came to create these attractive watches. "I am a watchmaker so I won't do just a fashion watch. I intend to do something more classical in the future as I will be doing Chronoswiss's women's watches from now on. I started working with Mercedes-Benz before coming here, but decided that I really wanted to get into the heart of the business; to do that, I had to become a watchmaker. So I did."

From mid-2001, she completed the international Wostep program (Watchmakers of Switzerland Training and Educational Programme). Natalie's first foray into watchmaking tackles the professional Timemaster line that her father developed in order to time his other great passion: motor rallies. The large screw-down onion-crown is designed for easy manipulation while wearing driving gloves and the bezel rotates to monitor starting and stopping times. Straps that fit over racing overalls snap on and off to facilitate speedy pit stops, and the numbers are marked out in Super-LumiNova to aid visibility. These colourful offerings join another new Timemaster model for 2005, the 24-hour 'Day-and-Night'. Half of its dial - let alone the numbers - is covered in Super-LumiNova.

"'Swiss Made' is not good enough for us. We use 100% Swiss components - more than many other companies who put the same stamp on their dials. So next year, we will put '100% Swiss' on our dials instead."

### One-man band

But before moving onto Herr Lang's very own surprises for 2005, a little bit of history. Lang has achieved what few others have even dreamed of: he has created an independent watch company from scratch, which, in a mere 22 years of existence, has not only become a collector's favourite but has swept up awards including Watch of the Year in 2003 from Armband Uhren for the Chronoscope (the world's first single-button chronograph with a regulator dial) and accolades for the analogue/digital/retrograde 'Delphis' in 1996. He has broken new ground and set trends in motion. All this not from the bosom of Watch Valley, Switzerland, but Munich.

Lang started his watchmaking career at Heuer's stopwatch and chronograph manufacture, before continuing his studies in Würzburg in the early 1980s. When the quartz cloud darkened the skies for mechanical watchmaking, Lang made the first of what were to be bold, counter-current moves.

Finding himself out of a job, he set up shop in his garage in 1981 and bought up old movements and components and began repairing mechanical watches, earning himself the reputable nickname 'Mr Chronograph' among collectors. It was not long before he started to produce his own timepieces and in 1982, the first 'Chronoswiss' emerged, in the form of a chronograph with moonphase display. The following year Chronoswiss SA was officially founded. There can be no sweeter reward for Mr Lang than knowing that his first watches are now in museums or watch collections, proving that his hunch for the renaissance of the mechanical watch was spot on.

Chronoswiss is best known for its regulator-style watches, which Lang describes as "my visiting card." It was 1987 when he introduced the world's first serially manufactured 'Régulateur' wristwatch - another milestone in Lang's rapidly blossoming career.



Swiss company Dubois-Depraz from Le Lieu was commissioned by Gerd-Rüdiger Lang to perfect Chronoswiss's latest complication - the Perpetual Calendar (steel model pictured; £13,750). The Chronoswiss calibre C.127 utilises Dubois-Depraz's exclusive calendar module 5800 C.



(Left) The new quarter repeater deliberately bucks the current trend for minute repeaters. The rose-gold variant is pictured (€14,500), adjacent to its Enicar-based movement - developed with Dubois-Depraz, who supplied the repeater module E94. Pushing the button at 10 o'clock causes a hammer to ring out the number of hours on one gong ("ding") and two hammers to strike against two gongs to ring out the quarter-hours ("ding-dong").

(Right) This new 'Day-and-Night' Timemaster (€4,250) has a 24-hour-display with the '24' numeral located at the 6 o'clock position. This enables optimal legibility in aviation and coincides with our natural biorhythm - it is easier to read the time of day in the upper half-circle of the dial than in the lower one, which corresponds with our sleeping time, when we are least likely to check the time.

With its distinctive dial configuration, it pays homage to the original pendulum clocks by which watchmakers used to set their pocket watches. Designed to enhance legibility, each unit of time is displayed on a separate dial. No hands overlap, so there is less margin for error. A stroll around the watch fairs today will throw up any number of regulators, from Chopard's LUC to Oris and Vacheron Constantin. But the trend started at Chronoswiss, as Lang is keen to point out.

### Pedigree

Chronoswiss has distinguished itself with a series of world firsts, including the 1990 automatic regulator, with its exclusive manufacture Chronoswiss C 122 movement. Nineteen ninety-two saw the first split-seconds chronograph 'Rattrapante' and in 1995 the 'Opus' emerged - the first serially produced,

automatic, skeletonised chronograph. And it gets better and better: in 2004, Lang unveiled his 'Régulateur à Tourbillon Squelette', yet another world first that is still the jewel in the Chronoswiss crown.

Lang is a self-confessed anglophile whose source of inspiration is John Harrison. His watches all follow traditional lines and at this point he slips in the conversation that his daughter's funky new Timemasters, are "not from Harrison." In terms of pedigree, Lang believes in transparency and openly talks about his movements. All are assembled and cased up in Munich once the Biel branch has checked them. Many of Chronoswiss's watches, such as this year's Digiteur, have old mechanisms inside that have been adapted, while others like the Timemasters use the modified ETA calibre 2892-A2.

Chronoswiss is one of the few companies to list all of its suppliers and it is when discussing the 'Swiss Made' stamp on his dials that Lang becomes ever more emphatic. 'Swiss Made' is not good enough for us. We use 100% Swiss components - more than many other companies who put the same stamp on their dials. So next year we are going to put '100% Swiss' on our dials instead. I believe we have to be very clear. It is like salmon or tomatoes: we all know where the best ones come from, so we should be clear about where we come from."

### Sharing the passion

Today the 40-strong Munich-based staff (which Lang describes as "a big small company or a small big company") produces just 7,000 pieces a year. Each watch to leave the portals of the factory is imbued with Lang's philosophy. "I look

to the past to bring to the present machines precise to within one second a day. I love watchmaking and I want to share my passion. Each watch that I make is for me. I am a collector who wants to increase his collection and so each watch I make has to be different."

This year does not disappoint. The highlights include the limited edition rectangular 'Digiteur', which, apart from the windows revealing the hours and minutes, has another trick up its sleeve: ticking away inside is an original movement from the 1940s that Lang had tucked away in one of his drawers and adapted for this reincarnation. With immense pride, he also shows me Chronoswiss's first ever perpetual calendar, which certainly captures the house philosophy of 'luxess' - roughly translated as the luxury of less.

For someone known in the trade as 'Mr Chronograph', it should come as no surprise that another stellar entry for 2005 is an update of the Chronoscope - a single-button chronograph with an aperture on the regulator-style dial (what else?) that shows the

column wheel mechanism. And never one to follow the crowd, his latest repeater is not a minute repeater, but a quarter repeater. Why? "Because I want to have one-of-a-kind watches and there are so many minute repeaters on the market now."

By now, the desk is littered with mechanical marvels and I ask Lang which is his favourite. Quick as a flash, he looks me steadily in the eye and says, "My first and my last." By this, I assume he refers to the Digiteur (his pet project for the past five years) and his very first chronograph. But what is more important is the implication, rather than the watches themselves: a passion for both Chronoswiss's origins and Chronoswiss's future.

So what next? Clearly, a move into women's watches is on the cards, given Natalie's colourful entrance. "Women have taken everything from us," guffaws Lang. "Our wine, our cars and now our watches! Our shoes are the only thing they have left us. I am not a woman, so I will let my daughter do the new ladies' line. There is room for both." ○

(Left) Lang's favourite of the new range, the Digiteur MSA ('Montre sans Aiguilles' - literally, 'watch without hands'). The movement is an adapted calibre from the movement-blank specialist Fabrique d'ébauches de Fleurier (FEF), which closed its doors in 1979. White gold and red gold variants pictured, each limited to 99 pieces; £7,995 and £6,775 respectively.

(Right) The new Chronoscope with visible column wheel, in steel (€3,950). The term 'chronoscope' describes the chronograph and its function far more accurately, as 'scope' derives from the Greek, 'to see'. The word 'chronograph' ('to write') has entered common parlance erroneously, ever since it was used to describe early timepieces that displayed elapsed time by leaving a droplet of ink on a paper-covered dial.