

Passing Chime

Gérald Genta's unique Grande Sonnerie models are thoroughbred to the core

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When Gérald Genta was asked to remove his Mickey Mouse watch from the Geneva show some 30-odd years ago, his status as the watch industry's *enfant terrible* was sealed. Such subject material for dials was simply 'not done' and considered a sacrilege to the Swiss watch-making ethos. Today, characters like Betty Boop and Snoopy do not invoke even the twitch of an eyebrow, and only the dial of a Technomarine tourbillon dial is good enough for the likes of Spiderman. Horological freedom of expression has certainly come a long way since.

With Patek Philippe gearing up for the 30th anniversary celebration of the Genta-designed Nautilus, and Audemars Piguet's continuous reinterpretation of his Royal Oak design, we tend to forget that Genta was more than the original 'watch designer'. His brand philosophy was as passionately concerned with technique as it was with visual expression. This combination remains core to the brand's values in the 21st century, despite the eponymous founder having departed to set up Gérald Charles.

Sixth sense

Gérald Genta always had a mysterious intuition for what was on the horological horizon and with the luxury of hindsight we can see a remarkable set of technical developments that he either revived or instigated many years ahead of the competition. He was, for example, responsible for the reappearance of retrograde indicators, now seen as just another part of accepted dial design by brands great and small.

After the investment of long-term R&D by Genta, the renewed popularity of the minute repeater wristwatch was practically guaranteed when he created the world's thinnest interpretation of this complication, with a thickness of only 2.72 mm. Many after him would attempt to reproduce this feat. In 1987, he realised an automatic tourbillon wristwatch; the first to follow Audemars Piguet's premiere in 1986. More was to come: what was then the world's most complicated wristwatch arrived in 1994: a grande sonnerie tourbillon with perpetual calendar and second time-zone indicator.

Credit for such technical achievement is due also to Pierre-Michel Golay, who was Technical Director and co-founder of the brand. Golay had previously been responsible for technical developments at Patek Philippe and Audemars Piguet and was also an influential member of the commission responsible for overseeing the Poinçon de Genève. The Grand Sonnerie movement was developed under his auspices and this calibre still forms the base for the new watches being launched at BASELWORLD.

Big noises

The present Gérald Genta line has two Grande Sonnerie versions on offer. The first, in the round-cased Arena series is a manual-winding tourbillon version with a 'flip side' movement allowing the hammers and tourbillon to be viewed from the dial side. The second is part of the Octo series unveiled in 2004 (and first seen in *QP*, issue 9) – its case design unifying the circular and the octagonal (a Genta trademark) with strikingly geometric dial motifs.

The Grand Sonnerie movement was developed under Golay's auspices and still forms the basis for the latest Arena and Octo watches.

A view through the caseback of the Arena Grand Sonnerie, which, like the Octo, also features a minute-repeater function, plus double power reserve indicators.

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The Octo Grande Sonnerie Tourbillon is the newest addition to the Octo collection and is already exciting comment. As with Golay's original movement, automatic winding is used, making it unique among grande sonnerie watches. Often taken for granted, energy supply is absolutely essential to any watch's function; especially true in the case of a grande sonnerie watch. Here, the supply must be robust and ample enough to fulfil two functions simultaneously: timekeeping *and* chiming.

In rotation

The essential difference between grande sonnerie and other chiming watches such as the minute repeater is that the sonnerie is capable of functioning *en passant*, like a large public clock. Generally these have the choice of 'grande', 'petite' or silent modes. In 'grande', the watch will strike every hour on the hour, then the hour and corresponding quarter melody at each following quarter. In 'petite' mode, the watch will strike only the hour. Without the luxury of automatic winding, the grande mode normally leaves the winding barrel with little more than 20 hours of reserve power. Repeaters do not have these energy considerations, since they function 'on demand', only striking when a slider is pushed. The slider itself secondarily engages a winding mechanism, so not only does it release the chiming mechanism, but it also winds it.

In the case of such watches as the Octo Grande Sonnerie Tourbillon, which chimes the classic four-note 'Westminster' melody *and* has a tourbillon escapement, even more energy is required due to the movement's complexity. Two winding barrels are used and the winding rotor must be able to wind them both. Given the incredible number of parts required, this is no easy feat.

However, Gérald Genta has already built up more than a quarter-century's unbroken expertise with grande sonnerie complications, all based on a single in-house movement. As the tourbillon boom slowly hits its apotheosis, the current market is developing more and more interest in this complication, meaning Genta is in a well-placed and enviable position. If you thought that Gérald Genta is merely a high-end fashion brand, think again. You would be hard pressed to find such a contemporary look combined with such exclusive *haute horlogerie* anywhere else. ●

While the tourbillon is always fascinating to watch, Gérald Genta has chosen to hide this complication beneath the dial with the new Octo Grande Sonnerie, emphasising the striking dial design. It is, however, visible through the caseback.

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