

Double Time

A Lange & Söhne's revival of German watchmaking makes huge strides at an alarming rate

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 The arrival of the Lange Double Split – the world's first flyback chronograph with double rattrapante – confirms the status of A Lange & Söhne as a world-class manufacture. Should it maintain such relentless technical innovation, then we can be sure that Saxon horology really is back on track after the Cold War hiatus. Lange's Executive Vice President Hartmut Knothe reveals his long-term vision to *QP*.



At 11:34 on 22nd September, 1994, something rather momentous happened in a small but largely ignored corner of the former German Democratic Republic. The first example of the iconic Lange 1 was entered into the records of the resurrected Saxon watchmaking firm of A Lange & Söhne. In just 10 short years, Saxon watchmaking has made the sort of comeback that would do Lazarus credit and the firm of A Lange & Söhne is its standard bearer.

Before the two halves of Germany became whole again, Dresden was for many people little more than the name of a city singled out for a particularly damaging air raid towards the end of World War II, and a vague memory of cultural riches. Analogously, the name A Lange & Söhne was known to a few die-hard, historically minded horolophiles as being associated with some of the finest pocket watches made during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Forefather

Adolph Lange was born in 1815. His mentor, court watchmaker Johann Christian Friedrich Gutkaes, was amongst the foremost clock and watchmakers of Europe, creating what must be one of the first 'digital' clocks to appear in a public space, when he unveiled his daring design for the 'five minute' clock at the opera house in Dresden.

In all, Lange spent more than 10 years learning his trade, also managing to pick up a thing or two about corporate politics in the process: in 1842 he married the boss's daughter and the company was renamed Gutkaes & Lange. The following year he entered into negotiations with the Minister of State, Count von Lindenau, about setting up a watch factory nearby. In the summer of 1845 he was granted the go-ahead to found an eponymous watchmaking concern in the village of Glashütte. It was not always easy and at first the shortage of skilled labour meant that Lange went through apprentices like Henry VIII went through wives. However, over the years the business became established.

Adolph Lange was instrumental in changing the focus of watchmaking in Saxony from a patronage-based system of individual relationships between watchmaker and customer to the sort of approach that is as current today as it was in 1845: whether he knew it or not, Lange the man was becoming a brand. Destined for world fame, the manufactory was renamed 'A Lange & Söhne', when his son Richard became co-owner in 1868, followed by his brother Emil three years later. Adolph may have died in 1875, but by the early 20th century A Lange & Söhne of 'Glashütte in Sachsen' was a world famous marque.

The legacy of war

The second half of the 20th century was not so kind to Glashütte and the Saxon watchmaking industry. On May 8th, 1945, the last day of World War II in Europe, Lange's factory was destroyed by bombing, and a few years later the business itself was expropriated by the Soviet authorities: like Dresden, Glashütte found itself in East Germany.

The various watch businesses in Glashütte were amalgamated to produce mass-market timepieces for the people by the people. What had hitherto been considered fine craftsmanship was branded as elitism and decadence. The Communist bloc was hardly a place where high watchmaking could flourish! Nevertheless, Glashütte still produced marine chronometers for several Warsaw Pact navies.



Adolph's great grandson Walter Lange fled to West Germany and hoped to re-establish the name of Lange, but until the sudden collapse of communism this was little more than a pleasant and comforting dream. However, it was a dream that was shared with charismatic watch boss Günter Blümlin, who was running Jaeger LeCoultre and IWC, in whom Lange found a sponsor. It was then that a third highly influential figure entered the picture.

Enter Herr Knothe

Hartmut Knothe had grown up in Glashütte and had worked in the watch industry during the days of communism. After reunification, the Treuhand, the state body concerned with privatising the publicly owned businesses of the former East Germany, invited him to take over the whole of the state watchmaking business in Glashütte, which at the time employed 2,500 people. He declined.

Now, 15 years after the collapse of communism, he sits in the boardroom at Lange's manufacturing headquarters and explains his decision. "At the same time as the Treuhand asked me to

take over the formerly state-owned company, I was asked by Lange and Blümlin if I wanted to work with them. I chose the Lange story because it seemed more interesting to revive a luxury company and go into a niche market.

"From 1990 we had a clear vision of what Lange might do in the luxury watch market. The old concept of 1845–1948 was a family business making pocket watches. That was the first life of a company. Our vision was to take the aesthetic and technical elegance of Lange pocket watches and put them onto the wrist, using new techniques, new design, and taking into account the high demand for functionality and for watchmaking innovation."

Knothe must have been encouraged by the degree of goodwill extended by the trade, with one Viennese customer ordering watches before they were even designed. In the event this goodwill was not misplaced. When the Lange 1 (from £12,400 to £19,400) made its debut 10 years ago it more than met the brief of transferring the lexicon of the Lange pocket watch to the wrist, simultaneously demonstrating technical and aesthetic innovation.

(Left) The platinum variant of the Langematik Perpetual (£34,000). As well as a perpetual calendar function, it retains the patented zero-reset mechanism of the standard Langematik.

(Centre) The yellow-gold case variant of the Lange 1 (£12,400) – the first watch created following A Lange & Söhne's revival in 1990.

(Right) The pink-gold Lange Datograph (£22,800) upon whose success the Double Split has been built. Like the Double Split, it features a flyback chronograph and precisely jumping minute counter.

Hartmut Knothe (right) is pictured here with Fabian Krone, who – as of May 1st 2004 – is the new CEO of Lange Uhren GmbH, having been Managing Director of Marketing, Sales and Finance since January 2003.



The idea of separating the functions from each other and placing them in their own parts of the dial (the seconds spin around in their own circle, which does not intersect with the area in which hours and minutes rotate, while the power reserve indicator oscillates between 'Auf' and 'Ab' in yet another separate part of the dial) was daring and different, but it has since caught on to such a degree that Lange is far from the only brand to offer this dial layout today.

Indeed, it could be argued that the Lange 1 was one of the most influential timepieces of the 1990s. It is an icon. And yet, conversely, it has made Lange's job more difficult by being such a hard act to follow. But, striking though the Lange 1 is, there are plenty of other technical refinements that crop up throughout the Lange range. There is, for example, the zero reset mechanism, which is one of the most intriguing features of the Langematik (from £8,600). Pull out the crown and the second hand goes to zero, automatically re-starting when the crown is pushed back, ensuring greater accuracy when resetting.

Double split

It is the re-interpretation of the technical triumphs of its pocket watch heyday that is guiding Lange into the 21st century. There is no more vivid example of this than the Lange

Double Split (£56,700), which made its debut at this year's Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie (SIHH).

The rattrapante or split-seconds chronograph function has long been one of my personal favourites when it comes to complications – it makes the horological theatre of the chronograph just that little bit more exciting as, with a touch of a push piece, one of the sweep-seconds hands is frozen in position, while the other continues its circumnavigation of the dial. However, the functionality of the rattrapante has hitherto been circumscribed in that it has only been able to measure a difference in time of 60 seconds: perfectly adequate if one is timing the difference between first and second place in a race at Ascot, but less useful when one wants to compare successive lap times of a particular car at a Grand Prix. It is this lacuna that the Lange Double Split addresses.

Technical virtuosity

With a movement inspired by a double-rattrapante Lange pocket watch dating from the late 19th century, the Lange Double Split has built upon the proven success of the Lange Datograph (£22,800–£29,000) and delivers a revolutionary time-keeping device that has a jumping minute counter. Thus not only are the seconds 'split', but so are the minutes: this allows comparative measurements of up to 30 minutes – a 3,000% improvement if one is statistically minded. It is quite brilliant.



A total of 465 parts comprise the movement of the Double Split. The two column wheels and four screwed gold chatons can be seen, integrated in the Lange L001.1 movement.

This being a German-built wristwatch, that is not all that the Double Split delivers. Amplitude is not affected when the sweep-seconds hand stops; a specially developed disengagement mechanism sees to that. Even the power source – a Nivarox 1 hairspring developed by Lange and made in-house – is subtly different: it is not attached to a balance spring stud, but secured by a balance spring clamp, which will ease servicing of the watch.

Such innovation, both on the grand scale and in the smallest, most commonplace aspects of a movement, shows that Lange has the potential and the technical virtuosity necessary for progression and growth. Knothe is rather proud of the interest that Richemont boss Johann Rupert has taken in Lange. According to Knothe, Rupert declared that he wanted Lange to be "a benchmark for Richemont." The South African-based luxury mogul might have added with perfect justification that Lange should be a benchmark for the renascent German watch industry as a whole. ●

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Illustration of the function of the rattrapante mechanism. It shows the rattrapante hands synchronised and stopped (pale blue). The shaft of the chrono and rattrapante minute counter can be seen top right.

