



Heartfelt

For low-key sophistication,
see Frédérique Constant

James Gurney

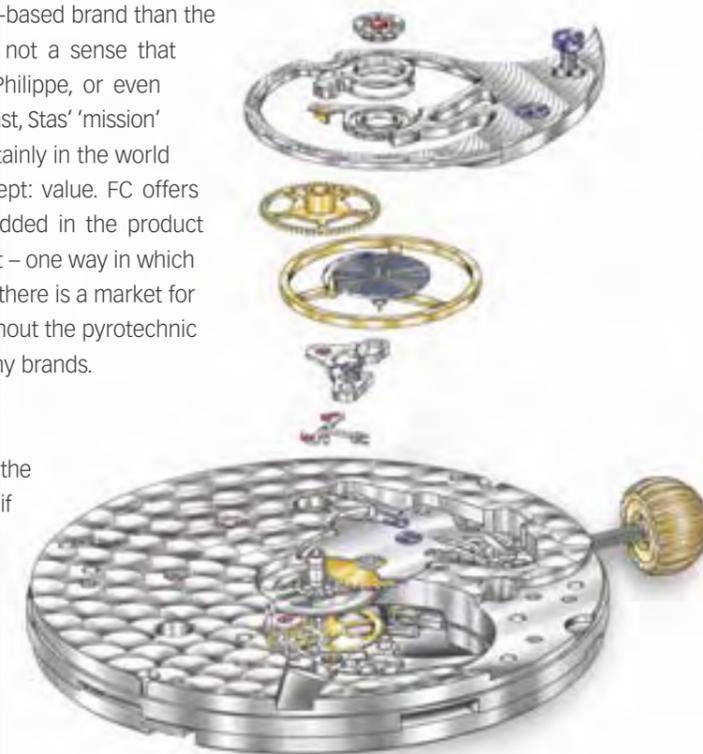


Unlike all too many start-up brands, Frédérique Constant has never done 'flash' that well. There are a few discreetly diamond-set watches, but these are virtually mandatory under Swiss law nowadays. And there is sponsorship activity, but only of a regrettably appropriate and even interesting bent; such as the European Healey Rally – an event as light on celebrities as the cars are light on spoiler kits. If you are looking for clues as to what watch David Beckham will be wearing next, then you are probably reading the wrong article. If, however, you are looking for style, character and a bit of value, then read on.

It might seem odd to start by defining what Frédérique Constant is not, but its avoidance of the flock mentality is where the interest lies. It is not that FC is anti-fashion, or keen on making watches that will not sell; it is just that there is more to being an aggressively value-based brand than the absolutes of volume and margin. There is not a sense that Peter Stas wishes he was running Patek Philippe, or even making a challenge in that direction. By contrast, Stas' 'mission' is to offer that most unglamorous and – certainly in the world of *haute horlogerie* – rarely heard-of concept: value. FC offers watches with character and identity embedded in the product rather than relying on celebrity endorsement – one way in which he *is* following Patek. Stas is convinced that there is a market for such an offer and that it can be reached without the pyrotechnic marketing activities stock-in-trade of so many brands.

Heart of the matter

Having a strategy based on the strengths of the product being offered is all very well, but only if the product stands up. In this respect, 2004 has been a landmark year for FC. Having seen others copy its Heart Beat concept – showing the balance wheel in action through the front – Peter Stas realised that



Having seen others copy its Heart Beat concept, Frédérique Constant needed something new to retain ownership of the idea.



Solid, 18 ct. rose-gold Heart Beat model (£3,995).

something new was needed to retain FC's ownership of the idea; and this was to commission an entirely new movement based on the concept.

The FC-910 calibre was designed around its Heart Beat opening, centred at 6 o'clock and revealing the balance spring and regulator, suspended from a slender bridge, akin to a flying

tourbillon. The new movement was developed by an in-house team of eight specialists in co-operation with the École d'Horlogerie de Genève, École d'Ingenieurs de Genève and the Horloge Vakschool Zadkine.

The team was put together and began development work in a very short period of time. The concept was essentially born in October 2001 and CAD development began in April 2002. Under two years later, in February this year, a finished product was shown to journalists. Current production is still at the testing stage – that is, complete movements are being produced, but not at full capacity as tests and analysis of the production process continue. Deliveries of complete watches are expected as of June this year.

Not wishing to repeat the mistakes of the past, legal protection for developments associated with the movement have been patented, while 'Frédérique Constant Heart Beat' has been registered as a trademark.

As new movements are rare on the ground outside the most prestigious watch companies, Frédérique Constant should be congratulated on an achievement that would have caused hilarity and ridicule if mentioned only a few years ago. They should also be congratulated for producing a watch that is interesting and attractive, let alone for the significance it holds for its makers. ○

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