



Saxon Seconds

Dornblüth and Sohn's growing prominence as one of Glashütte's smallest manufactures

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Wind the clock back to 1999. It is Dieter Dornblüth's 60th birthday and Dirk presents his father with a wristwatch based on a Glashütte movement. Overcome with emotion, Dieter confesses to Dirk that, for 40 years, he has harboured the desire to launch his own brand. That evening, father and son founded their eponymous watch company.

The revival of German watchmaking originated in Glashütte for obvious reasons: the historical brands were based in that part of what was once East Germany and it is where the country's horological skills lingered throughout the years under the Communist heel. It is natural for any new brand to turn to that area as a source of watchmaking talent, while the giants – such as A Lange & Söhne and Glashütte Original – could not be based anywhere else. It is all about survival.

Which explains, in part, the geography of rising stars Dieter and Dirk Dornblüth. The father and son are also East German, their atelier based in Kalbe in Saxony-Anhalt, some 250 km from Glashütte. The firm, officially called Dornblüth & Sohn, consists of Dieter, Dirk, another watchmaker and a computer-savvy assistant. It represents the old traditions with the added spice of extreme exclusivity. Although the company only began selling watches with its name on the dial in 1999, it is already held in high esteem by a coterie of in-the-know collectors. They have to be because, aside from a tiny smattering of dealers in Germany, you can only buy a

Dornblüth directly from the company. And they only make between 5 and 10 watches a month.

Identity

As Hartmut Kraft – effectively the company's managing director – explains, "The 40 years of hardship under the GDR turned out to have a hidden benefit. Watchmakers such as Dieter couldn't simply call up ETA for spares when they needed parts for a repair. They needed to fashion them themselves, using the old skills.

"Dieter is of the old school; truly representative of the East German heritage. But because of the years cut off from Swiss development, Dieter – like other watchmakers upholding the traditions in little 'cells' throughout East Germany – became self-sufficient. When I first joined Dirk and Dieter to assist with sales and product development, I was surprised to learn that the designs for the existing movements were all hand-drafted!"

Dieter, though semi-retired, remains active as supervisor and ideas man; he has, after all, plenty of experience. Dirk, 34, served his apprenticeship with



The bridges are rose gold-plated and decorated with Geneva stripes – they ooze the refinement of watches bearing far higher tags.

(Above) The Calibre 99.0 movement. Like the Calibre 99.2, its bridges are 18 ct. rose-gold plated, with Geneva stripes.

(Previous page) Calibre 99.2 with a rose-gold case, showing the power reserve indicator in addition to the seconds sub-dial that adorns the Calibre 99.0 alone (€7,950).

Dieter and also undertook courses at Glashütte. Between them, they have managed to create what may qualify (alongside Philippe Dufour) as the smallest manufacture in the business. Which all depends on how you define a manufacture.

Kraft observes, "There is no need to make one's own straps or crystals or even cases for that matter. The heart of the watch is the movement. Our original small seconds watch uses a Unitas baseplate and three wheels in the wheel train. That's it. We make everything else – even our own hands – or commission-specific items such as dials from German suppliers. The next generation of small seconds watches will use movements made entirely in-house, including all baseplates, by mid-2004."

Dornblüth's dearer model, with power reserve, already uses a movement with its own baseplate, though Kraft points out that some items, including balances and springs, will continue to be sourced outside. By mid-2005, the company will have added all-new movements, including a 'big date' model and an automatic. Dirk is also a hardcore 'chronograph nerd', as Kraft puts it. But Dirk himself admits that, "I'm a perfectionist and small companies can't do [chronographs] by themselves." So – for now at least – a Dornblüth chronograph will simply have to wait.

Another of Dirk's obsessions is the use of physically large movements, for durability and sturdiness. He favours large balance wheels, which require more spring power and is continually searching for ways to increase power reserve. The watches – all of which are manual – already provide a minimum of 48 hours' running time. To accommodate their 37 mm movements, all Dornblüth wristwatches come in 41.8 mm cases made by Fricker – steel or rose gold, fitted with Louisiana Alligator straps.

Repertoire

Dornblüth's catalogue is a concise one, which is a good thing: the team is producing watches flat out and aspire to only 250 pieces per annum by 2010. "We want to maintain exclusivity; to control the distribution and therefore the back-up," states Kraft. "That's why, aside from a handful of German dealers, we will only ever sell our watches directly to the end-purchaser. This also helps to keep the price down, which is important to Dirk."

Because of this, the Dornblüth selection seems under-priced. The steel Calibre 99.0 small seconds watch begins at €2,500, while the Calibre 99.2 in steel with small second and power reserve costs only €4,500. Despite the four-month waiting list, none of the collectors hot for a Dornblüth have been discouraged, with the hungriest markets being Taiwan and the USA. ●



(Left) Calibre 99.0, with silver dial and steel case (€2,500).

(Right) Unlike the majority of Dornblüth and Sohn's output, this Calibre 99.2 watch has a steel bracelet (€4,900). Rose-gold bracelet available as well.

But that waiting time is a small price to pay for an affordable, handmade wristwatch featuring a hand-engraved balance cock with a swan neck fine adjustment system. Dornblüth cuts the swan neck regulator from a steel plate, before undergoing the countless steps of refining, hardening, bevelling and polishing. Even the screw of the swan neck is manufactured in-house. The three-quarter bridges are rose gold-plated and decorated with Geneva stripes and the watches feature screw chatons and a sunray crown wheel. They ooze the refinement of watches bearing far higher tags.

Solid

Unapologetically German, Dornblüth and Sohn is also realistic and conscientious. It does not aspire to a huge owner base, nor is it obsessed with fashion, useless complications or diamond encrustation. As the dials attest, these are highly legible, robust timekeepers designed from the outset to beat reliably and dependably, to tell the time with utter clarity and precision, while adding a feeling of pride of ownership. Whether this is down to quality, exclusivity or individuality is irrelevant: the Dornblüths possess all three. ●

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