

The World According to Karl-Friedrich Scheufele

by Nicholas Foulkes

It is very easy to have fixed ideas about Chopard. I know, because I had them. For the last quarter of a century Chopard has made a watch called the Happy Diamond, which incorporates a highly ingenious concept: a diamond skids about between the dial and the watch glass, providing hours of harmless and undemanding – albeit expensive – amusement. This is horology at its most frivolous.

Happiness the Chopard way

Chopard also has a magazine, called, if memory serves me well, Happy World. In its pages, a crowd, which for the purposes of this article we should call the Happy Few, are seen disporting themselves around the world's flashiest fleshpots. If you are one of the (private) jet set, then wherever you are in the world you can usually count on there being a Chopard boutique nearby. You turn up to your villa in St Barths and find that you have forgotten to pack your Happy Beach (a version of the happy diamond with gem-set fish swimming around the dial): simply pop along to the local branch of Chopard. You find yourself in London, are suddenly asked to Elton John's house for dinner and discover that you have not got nearly enough carats to wear: never fear Chopard is near – Bond Street, to be precise.

And then there are the parties. Chopard throws starry parties the way other jewellers and watch-makers send out press releases. Take the one held in London in honour of Sir Elton towards the end of last year – guests were ferried from the Chopard store in specially decorated taxis (pumping out Sir Elton's pop-tastic tunes) to dinner with the man himself and the froth at the top of international cappuccino society. I was fortunate enough to be invited to this glittering evening and sat on a table with a



Charvet-clad decorator, a prominent businessman and a most fascinating woman who had recently spent time on a friend's ranch in America, shooting coyotes from a helicopter with, as far as I could gather, a high-powered sniper rifle and special goggles.

I have to say that I was gripped. The world of Chopard is indeed perpetually happy and its clients are amongst some of the richest and most exotic people one is likely to come across outside the pages of a Harold Robbins novel.

However, I never had Chopard marked out as a serious watch-maker. Until, that is, last summer, when I took a trip to the mountains with Karl Friedrich Scheufele, scion of the dynasty that runs Chopard's global Happy Empire.

At the helm

Given his customers, one might have expected 45-year-old Scheufele to have a taste for Dolce & Gabbana and Versace, or at the very least be wearing a few of his own more iridescent gem-set pieces. Not a bit of it. Instead I met a very trim, impeccably but soberly dressed individual, who sported a delicious-looking prototype tourbillon (large plain white-gold case, black dial, black croc strap).

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Whereas the traditional Chopard customer might be more at home at the Voile Rouge guzzling Louis Roederer Cristal, Karl Friedrich Scheufele is a claret connoisseur with his own boutique wine business. "We specialise in collector's wines, older vintages and large formats: magnums and double magnums. People in Switzerland know this if they are looking for a special vintage or a special size, and if we don't have it, we can find it."

And while other Chopard wearers may be partying with Sir Elton or grooving into the early hours at St Tropez's Les Caves du Roy, Scheufele would rather be on his farm with his family or skiing cross-country in the Swiss Alps.

In fact the only identifiably 'Chopard moment' was when he announced that his Porsche had broken down and that he was having his Bentley Continental R – I much prefer Bentleys to Porsches anyway – brought round so that we could go for a drive to Fleurier.



Above: Chopard's LUC Quattro, a four-winding-barrel tourbillon, hand-wound with an 8-day power reserve.

Above right: Chopard's Pro One Diver watch with COSC-certified, 70-hr power reserve and automatic movement.



If I had to compile a list of un-Chopard destinations, the quiet mountain community of Fleurier would be very near the top of the list. Fleurier has come to the notice of serious horolophiles as the location of the manufacture of cult brand Parmigiani Fleurier; but it is an otherwise unremarkable, if pleasant, place. To describe it as a one-horse town is to imply rather too much in the way of excitement.

A solid grounding

It is perhaps because of the very un-Chopard pace of life in Fleurier that Karl Friedrich Scheufele chose it as the location for his audacious assault on the world of *haute horlogerie*. High-quality watches had borne the Chopard name in the 19th century and, until as recently as the 1970s, much of Chopard's business had been in sleek yet subdued timepieces. Scheufele became obsessed with creating a Chopard factory dedicated to high watchmaking and capable of developing a watch movement that was entirely *sui generis*, specific only to Chopard. As well as the attendant prestige, the far-sighted Scheufele felt that such a move would lessen Chopard's dependence on the large movement and component makers that supply much of the Swiss watch industry.

So, in the autumn of 1993, he started working on making his vision a reality. "There were times

when it seemed to be taking forever," recalls Scheufele. But now, after a decade, Chopard watches using Louis Ulysse Chopard (LUC) movements are made in the town of Fleurier, and such pieces as the LUC tourbillon worn by Scheufele – powered by a unique quadruple-barrelled movement offering 10 days' power reserve, and scheduled to be launched at this year's Basel fair – are much in demand.

Touring the manufacture with this softly spoken, well-dressed and impeccably mannered man, there is in no doubt that however many sun-dried, botoxed beauties may pile through the doors of Chopard, Karl Friedrich Scheufele is an enthusiast for what one might, slightly snobbishly, call 'proper watches'. Moreover, he is a man who has grown up in the watch business rather than having joined it as a slick marketer adept in the sophistry that steers so much of the luxury goods market today.

"I went into jewellery making and I did a very practical 2 years working in the workshop at another jewellery company that did watch cases for Cartier and Rolex: a real, good-quality Swiss jeweller and case maker that sadly no longer exists."

"You had to sit on your butt and learn the trade," he says of his time as an apprentice. "I made myself a watchcase, by hand, from A–Z, and I still



have it to this day. It was a great learning experience. Nowadays there are too many people in our trade who don't know a thing about what the people in the workshops are doing."

In the late '70s he worked as a salesman for the family firm and he still has a nostalgia for the days when "you travelled, you had the collection with you, you saw the customer and you sat down to sell watches you were carrying in your bag. There were not so many worries about security," he says, adding: "Nowadays all of that has become much more difficult. Back then you went to see your customers with a suitcase full of watches; today marketing and launching a product is everything. The watch trade has become much more like other luxury businesses: there is a lot more planning and a lot more professionalism, but at the same time some people have forgotten about the basics."

A passion for classic cars

Scheufele is well acquainted with the basics, having grown up surrounded by springs and wheels, jewels and crowns, rotors and base plates: "When I was 10 years old, I would sit in our watchmaker's workshop playing with watch parts." However, the young Karl Friedrich's interests were more automotive than horological: "I was making these collages that represented cars; I glued them onto pieces of cardboard and made cars. I was crazy about cars: I knew everything about them and my father was the same, a car enthusiast. He bought his first collector's car, a 300 SL, which we still have, maybe 20 years

ago at a time when not many people were interested in antique cars. Even before I had my driving licence I drove my father's 1961 mk2 Jaguar – a beautiful car – around Geneva without a licence, which would be unthinkable today."

However, the Swiss authorities can be assured that Scheufele now has a full driving licence and more than enough cars to use it with. "My first antique car was a Porsche speedster. Actually, I had a Porsche 356 before I had an everyday car. It was a ruin but I still drove it for about a year. My second was a bright yellow VW beetle, and then there was an Austin Healey, a 1935 Aston Martin Ulster (one of the 17 real ones by the way), a 4.5-L Bentley, a Mini Cooper S and the 911 RS2 from 1973. The latest car in the 'family' is a Barchetta Ferrari 1955."

"An old car gives you the authentic driving experience," he explains. "New cars have blocked out the feelings that you used to get; it's kind of like sitting in a totally protected cell with no noise and no wind. You are no longer feeling the road. Your driving skills are not really important. There is no excitement. When you drive a '30s car you are totally concentrated, even though you are not going that fast in reality; you have to think at every bend what you are going to do."

His enthusiasm for the world of vintage and classic cars is more than mere talk (or should that be torque?). Through Karl Friedrich, Chopard has become an integral part of the Mille Miglia revival road race in Italy. Each year's Mille Miglia is



accompanied by an eponymous Chopard watch. For Scheufele this activity is much more significant than mere product placement and sponsorship. "When I first saw a Mille Miglia retrospective, I thought that this was really something else and at the same time I thought it was a perfect connection with watches. The way vintage cars were made is the way we still make watches, with a lot of handwork. We regularly do watches or pieces of jewellery made to measure; it starts with a change of dial but often ends with a one-off piece. We still cater to such customers and I believe that should be part of our industry."

"Going back to the cars, the engines were made so beautifully and that's really what motivated me to think that a Chopard watch should have a Chopard movement; that is how the LUC idea was born."

The Quattro

Of all the movements he has developed, Scheufele is most proud of the Quattro, and he rattles off impressive statistics about the brain-child that was finally delivered at his Fleurier

manufacture. "The Quattro's four springs have a total length of one metre 80... all packed into four little barrels," he says with a touch of wonder in his voice. "The Quattro will remain an all-time favourite. It was a real challenge to create. I said to our people 'We have two barrels, why don't we have four?' and finally they said 'We can do it'. It is a great achievement when, in the beginning, something can't be done and then, in the end, you wind up coming through with the idea."

However, even when talking about barrels, springs and power reserve indicators, cars are never far from Scheufele's thoughts. "If it were a car I suppose that the Quattro would be something powerful, yet still refined, a little like the four-wheel-drive Bentley they are coming out with now."

However, in Karl Friedrich's mind, a collection of watches is superior in at least one significant aspect to a collection of cars. "The great thing about watches is that you can put them in any safe, but if you collect cars it is not so easy to find space." ◉

Further information: Tel: 020 7439 3304, www.chopard.co.uk