

FINANCIAL TIMES

How to spend it

DECEMBER 6 2014

THE HEIGHT OF COOL
CHALET DESIGN'S MODERN MAKEOVER





Clockwise from left:
Christophe Claret rose-gold and anthracite Soprano, £380,000. Vacheron Constantin rose-gold Patrimony Ultra-Thin, £291,150. FP Journe polished-steel Sonnerie Souveraine, about £465,000

At this level, watchmaking is so rarefied that only a small number of watchmakers will ever master the necessary skills and temperament

combined with other functions, in Lange's case a split second chronograph and perpetual calendar.

Assembly is another huge challenge. "A grande sonnerie is a self-striking watch, a so-called grand strike, and you have to be sure that every quarter of an hour the right amount of strikes are made. That takes a long period of adjustment and testing," explains Haas. There are 48 different permutations of strike and if just one of them is wrong then the whole striking mechanism – a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle of tiny components squeezed into a space just a few millimetres in height – has to be taken to pieces very carefully (so as not to disrupt the functioning of the other 47 permutations) and then rebuilt. What is even more frustrating for the watchmaker is that he is unable to test the watch immediately, as can be done with a minute repeater. Instead the watch has to run through an entire 12-hour cycle to verify that it all works as it should. And even though it costs more than €1.5m, buying one of these wristwatches is as much of a waiting game as making them. Lange estimates that assembling and adjusting its Grand Complication with grande sonnerie will take about a year, and only six will be made.

The unique nature of the complication and the skills required to work on it are mastered by only a handful of companies. It requires more than mere resources to make these watches; a special kind of mindset is required from the watchmaker, who may spend three months or more adjusting a grande sonnerie, which may be why a number of the most respected creators of grandes sonneries are independent makers with a touch of the maverick about them.

Philippe Dufour, for instance, is a legend for first having made a wristwatch grande sonnerie in the



early 1990s. And, as already mentioned, Christophe Claret makes chiming watches his speciality. He showcases his workshop's skills with a minute repeater Westminster called Soprano (£380,000, pictured top left). The late Dominique Loiseau was another name associated with this complication.

A further strong-willed character is François Paul Journe, whose Sonnerie Souveraine (about £465,000, pictured centre) took six years of development and makes use of 10 patents, of which perhaps the most salient is the winding stem and striking-control blocking lever. It is this mechanical refinement that, he claims, would enable a child of eight to use his creation. Such is the delicacy of the grande sonnerie that to change the date or even the time while the watch is striking is to run the risk of wrecking the carefully tuned system; however, Journe's patented system stops the striking system from operating when

the winding stem is pulled out and prevents the winding stem from being pulled out when the striking mechanism is running.

At this level, watchmaking is so rarefied that only a small number of watchmakers will ever master the necessary skills and temperament, and only a few connoisseurs will ever be able to afford the watches. Nevertheless, there are signs that the VIP enclosure of brands capable of this sort of exigent work is getting bigger. As well as the recent arrival of A Lange & Söhne, Blancpain is working on a new grande sonnerie; and it cannot be long before Vacheron Constantin joins the club – last year the brand launched the world's thinnest minute repeater (£291,150, pictured above left) and this year it unveiled

a multiple complication with astronomical functions. Greubel Forsey is also known to be interested in this type of complication. Looking a few years into the future, Hublot is working on a grande sonnerie, but nothing is expected before 2018.

As technology advances, it will be interesting to see what miracles watchmakers can coax from the hundreds of tiny components that make these elaborate complications. For instance, Patek's head of watch development Philippe Barat, who led the technical team that worked on the Grandmaster Chime for seven years, told me that computer-aided design assisted in the process of making its many complications into a wearable wristwatch by, as he put it, filling the holes in the movement: minute spaces into which components crafted to ever-more-exacting tolerances could be tucked. When I heard this, I asked if it would be possible to make a grande sonnerie Westminster chime with five gongs (for purists a "real" Westminster chime needs this many); so far the Geneva brand has only pulled this feat off in pocket-watch form, with the Star Calibre. Then for good measure they might like to add a chiming calendar that gives the day and month as well as the date. To squeeze all that into a wearable wristwatch is a tall order – but then the 200th anniversary is not for another 25 years. ♦

CHIME HONoured

A Lange & Söhne, +49-3505 3440; www.alange-soehne.com and see Harrods and other stockists. **Audemars Piguet**, 12 Place de la Fusterie, Geneva 1204 (+4122-319 0680; www.audemarspiguet.com) and branches/stockists. **Blancpain**, 11 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7529 0910; www.blancpain.com) and stockists. **Breguet**, 10 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7493 6767; www.breguet.com) and stockists. **Bulgari**, 168 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7872 9969; www.bulgari.com) and branches and see Selfridges and other stockists. **Chopard**, 12 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7409 4140; www.chopard.com) and branch/stockists. **Christophe Claret**, +4132-933 0000; www.christopheclaret.com. **FP Journe**, www.fpjourne.com and see William & Son. **Harrods**, 87-135 Brompton Rd, London SW1 (020-7225 6611; www.harrods.com). **Hublot**, 31 New Bond St, London W1 (020-3214 9970; www.hublot.com) and branches/stockists. **Jaeger-LeCoultre**, 1A Old Bond St, London W1 (020-7491 6970; www.jaeger-lecoultre.com) and see Harrods and branches/stockists. **Louis Vuitton**, 17-20 New Bond St, London W1 (020-3214 9200; www.louisvuitton.com) and branches. **Patek Philippe**, 15 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7493 8866; www.patek.com) and branches/stockists. **Piaget**, 169 New Bond St, London W1 (020-3364 0800; www.piaget.com) and see branches and Harrods. **Selfridges**, 400 Oxford St, London W1 (020-7318 7790; www.selfridges.com). **Vacheron Constantin**, 37 Old Bond St, London W1 (020-7578 9500; www.vacheron-constantin.com). **William & Son**, 10 Mount St, London W1 (020-7938 385; www.williamandson.com).