

Agile AGENHOR

BY ELIZABETH DOERR



Agenhor created the metronome style for the seconds display of this Steinway watch, a feat Jean-Marc Wiederrecht at first didn't think would be possible.

Wiederrecht has worked for close to three years alongside his son, Nicolas.





Agenhor is one of those behind-the-scenes complication makers in Geneva that you never hear about—until its founder wins a prize at 2007's Grand Prix d'Horlogerie

Twenty years ago two unknown watchmakers living in Geneva partnered up for a time to profit from each other's expertise. The little company they had created was called Dubuis & Wiederrecht.

These watchmakers, Roger Dubuis and Jean-Marc Wiederrecht, created many things together, the focus of which was usually something having to do with retrogrades, a small complication that makes the hand of a display, such as the date or seconds, flip back to the start after having reached the end of its scale.

The two men patented their retrograde design in 1988—a patent that expires this year, as a

matter of fact. They also created the world's first double retrograde perpetual calendar, an invention that helped launch Harry Winston Rare Timepieces back in 1989. The two men eventually split. Dubuis paired up with Carlos Dias to establish Manufacture Roger Dubuis and Wiederrecht founded Agenhor, which has since become one of the premier workshops for complication making behind the scenes in the *haute horlogerie* world.

"It has now been twenty years since registering the retrograde patent with Mr. Dubuis, and now every company uses a retrograde system, different or not," the likable Wiederrecht grins through an

explanation. "It is good; I am glad that everybody uses this concept. It was an idea to show that things don't only have to be round. It is an aesthetic problem to show the time differently. I was trying to make a start and an end to something, and I found the system to show it.

"Retrograde has existed for two hundred years. Everyone loves it and now everybody uses it. And now I am making other things."

The Art Form

Wiederrecht is an unassuming guy, and he likes it that way. Even dyed-in-the-wool watch fans may not have heard of him until last November when he won the 2007 Grand



This watchmaker assembles a Guy Ellia model.

Prix d'Horlogerie prize as the year's best movement designer or when he was introduced to a larger audience by name thanks to his work with MB&F, a company that follows a policy of transparency.

Longer discussions with Wiederrecht prove him to be more occupied with the academics of a watch and the purest values of the art form than the commercial side of high watchmaking.

"Our big problem now is to stay small. It is very important. We stay away from the big groups." Wiederrecht explains that he has had offers from many of the groups to buy him out, but that is not what this man and his wife, Christine—his business partner—are all about.

"At this point, we could make 4,000 or 5,000 more pieces (than

we do), but we don't want to. We want to stay like we are, in the very, very best environment. We make a very nice living. But we don't want to become bigger. We will remain at no more than thirty persons."

Right now, Wiederrecht's company employs twenty-six, and this expansion in personnel over the last two decades has meant a need for more space. His company is currently divided into two buildings, which is why he has finally invested in building his own little factory, due to open in Geneva's suburb Meyrin in mid-2009.

Complications

Different from companies like La Joux-Perret and BNB, Agenhor does not make standard movements. In fact, Agenhor does not

make movements at all. Wiederrecht is a complication maker, which means that his specialty is to add modules and integrated complications to existing movements.

"What's nice here is that clients come with new ideas in their heads, and we are in charge of making that come true," Wiederrecht explains.

"And that is very, very interesting. We have to understand what these people want. The big difference between us and the others is that we don't make standard movements, and after (working with us) the designers of the brands end up making the watches. We need a wish, an idea, a drawing from our clients and we make the movements happen from the drawings."



Wiederrecht was the mastermind behind MB&F's Horological Machine No. 2.

Agenhor's business is custom—not one movement, complication, or watch ends up like the next, and all is done in close cooperation with the product manager of the brand in question.

"They show us in drawings what they want... it would be nice to have a hand like this, and a big date here—is it possible?—and we make the movements from that sketch or drawing," Wiederrecht explains.

New Each Time

Is it hard for Wiederrecht to develop something new for each of his

demanding clients? The answer to this is as straightforward as Wiederrecht himself. "No. And it's a pleasure to make something new for each of them."

Two very good examples of this are MB&F and Steinway Watches.

"You know that I have worked with Max Büsser for the last ten years," Wiederrecht explains of his relationship with MB&F. "It has been really very interesting for me."

Büsser and Wiederrecht started cooperating when Büsser was still heading up Harry Winston Rare Timepieces. When Büsser

left to begin his own company concentrating on unique collectors' pieces, he once again turned to Wiederrecht for his company's expertise in complication making.

"He (Büsser) has ideas, and he and Eric Giroud (designer) work very well together. They bring drawings, and then we see what we can do. And only after that, do we look back. It is crazy," Wiederrecht explains of his well-documented work for MB&F.

How long does it take to develop a crazy timepiece like MB&F's Horological Machine No. 2?

Agenhor's 26-man team includes many young designers. "They have young neurons," Wiederrecht quips.



“A good year, maybe two,” is the reply. “On many things, it is immediately clear (how to proceed). But after working on it for a few days or a few weeks, looking for an idea how to do it, I go back and say sometimes that it is not possible. Sometimes if I just forget about the fact that it is not possible, maybe the next night the answer arrives. And if they really want the product, I hope I can find something sometimes.”

Steinway

This was strongly in evidence when Wiederrecht and his young team worked on the new Steinway watch, which was destined to contain a second hand that looks like a metronome. Agenhor achieved this, though it seemed a sheer impossibility at the beginning.

“I just said, ‘No, that is not possible, forget it.’ But then I had an idea. When he came, I told him it would not be possible because it needs too much energy; it is not

possible in such a small movement, you can’t find that (the energy). But you need a special idea.” And—as always—Agenhor came up with the idea, with its development taking a mere four months.

No Prototypes Here

“One of the problems (in our industry) is machines. You can make what you want with the computer; virtual watches are exploding now because it is very easy, but a watch is much more complicated than a virtual one. When you want to make something that works, I can tell you it is very difficult,” Wiederrecht explains.

“When I make something, it is very simple. I always thought it was a problem to make a simple thing, but if it is too complicated you have to forget it, because it won’t

work. And now we see too many watches (being introduced), and I am sure they don’t work.”

In fact, Wiederrecht is so sure of his system and its simplicity that he doesn’t even waste time or resources on prototyping the complications he produces.

“I hear many brands saying today they want to verticalize. This is wrong because you need the best people to make everything. I need Mimotec; I can’t make what Mimotec makes. When I make my little wheels, I use the best man in the profession. He comes here; I give him my plans and he makes me



Jean-Marc Wiederrecht's *engrainage de précision*, made of LIGA nickel.



The Milus Herios with tri-retrograde seconds is an ►► Agenhor creation.

Wiederrecht is especially proud of Arnold's True North perpetual calendar.



the piece. I work only with the best people," he says, advocating the traditional Swiss supplier system.

"If I do it myself, it works. And it works not because an exceptional watchmaker made the piece. It works because a normal watchmaker will be able to make it after me. And that means we use only definitive parts. When I have to make a new wheel, I make 1,200 pieces because you can't make less (using the LIGA system). All the pieces will be the same, and if it is wrong I will have

to put 1,200 pieces in the trash. But if it is good, they all will be good. If you make a prototype you can make it quite fast, perhaps, but afterwards you have to make the same again. If (the first watch I make) works, the series is made. We just have to copy and with that we are six months faster. That is why I make only definitive watches. No prototypes."

Make no mistake: Wiederrecht is not giving away his intellectual property. His team of watchmakers does put the movements together

on premises before they are delivered to the customer to be encased and completed.

New Technology

Wiederrecht is an advocate of traditional watchmaking, but that doesn't mean he won't use a new technology if it helps to make a movement better or more precise.

Using Mimotec's LIGA technology, Wiederrecht has also developed and patented an innovative asymmetrical gear tooth design, which enables the play-



Each watchmaker at Agenhor is in charge of assembling a project from A to Z.

free meshing of gears without risk of binding. These wheels are found throughout Agenhor's complications; they ensure precise, vibration-free displays that are resistant to shock. Wiederrecht has no special name for his patented gear wheel, which is manufactured using the LIGA process, and simply calls it *en-grainage de précision*.

"We started using this technology here at Agenhor SA in 2000, eight years ago. Without them (Mimotec) I don't think it would have been possible to make these wheels, that is clear to me."

Though Wiederrecht is all for the LIGA process, which entails "growing" nickel or nickel-phosphorus parts on a wafer, he is decidedly against the use of silicon.

"Wristwatches containing

too much silicon are dead in a few years. I think the system probably represents very big progress for cheap watches, but not for high-end watches. The watch must be finished by a person. When you sell a watch for 100,000 francs, or whatever, you need to know that a person has made it, and that it can be repaired. You can see how nicely it is made. Silicon, I am sure, is very important for watches that are not so expensive. I am sure it is a very good application for cheap watches."

Quality not quantity

The timepieces Agenhor manufactures are, naturally, sold only in small amounts and small series of 20 to 200 at the most. In total, Agenhor sells about 100 finished movements each month, repre-

senting between 20 and 1,000 pieces of each model currently in production at Agenhor per year.

At the beginning of 2008, Agenhor had taken on six new developments, raising the number of different models currently in production in the Geneva workshop to thirty-seven. These creations—with the exception of the MB&F pieces—are all based on existing movements supplied by Agenhor's customers, including calibers by ETA, Vaucher, Girard-Perregaux, and Frédéric Piguet.

Wiederrecht's working life flashes before his eyes every day—especially while he thumbs through an impressive catalogue of some of the world's most complicated timepieces representing his work; watches that he has developed for his clients, including perpetual cal-

endars, jump hours, and retrograde functions of every kind.

Wiederrecht is especially proud of True North, a watch that he created for Arnold & Son, which introduced an annual calendar version in 2005 and a perpetual calendar variation in 2006. This highly complicated timepiece powered by a movement 40 mm in diameter uses the ETA 2892 as its base. This is the only watch with a compass function that can find true north within an accuracy of one degree.

"I love this one because it was so complicated to make," explains a proud Wiederrecht,

who added the movement parts needed for this function as well as the moon phase (calculated on a 29.5-day lunar cycle), the perpetual calendar, the equation of time, and true solar time. These extra components included seven of his *engrainage de précision* wheels, which comprise entry and exit surfaces on each tooth unit for less friction.

Own brand?

Wiederrecht loves the academic challenge of making a new complication. He is modest, though, and thus not too interested in making his own watches. He simply loves

watchmaking, not necessarily the business of it.

Has Wiederrecht ever thought to make his own watches, perhaps inspired by Büsser's plunge into autonomy?

What watchmaker hasn't? But this modest artist prefers to stay with the academic challenge of a new idea. At this point Wiederrecht's wife and business partner, Christine, chimes in, knowing her unpretentious husband couldn't possibly answer this question as it should be answered. "Jean-Marc has so much imagination. He couldn't use it for just one brand!" ☺

A family affair: Jean-Marc, Christine, and Nicolas Wiederrecht.

