



MB & F's debut timepiece — the Horological Machine No.1.

# REINVENTING THE **WHEEL**

At the peak of his career Max Büsser walked away from it all. Now he's on a roll and, as **Bernadette Png** finds out, nothing can stop him from living out his horological adventure.

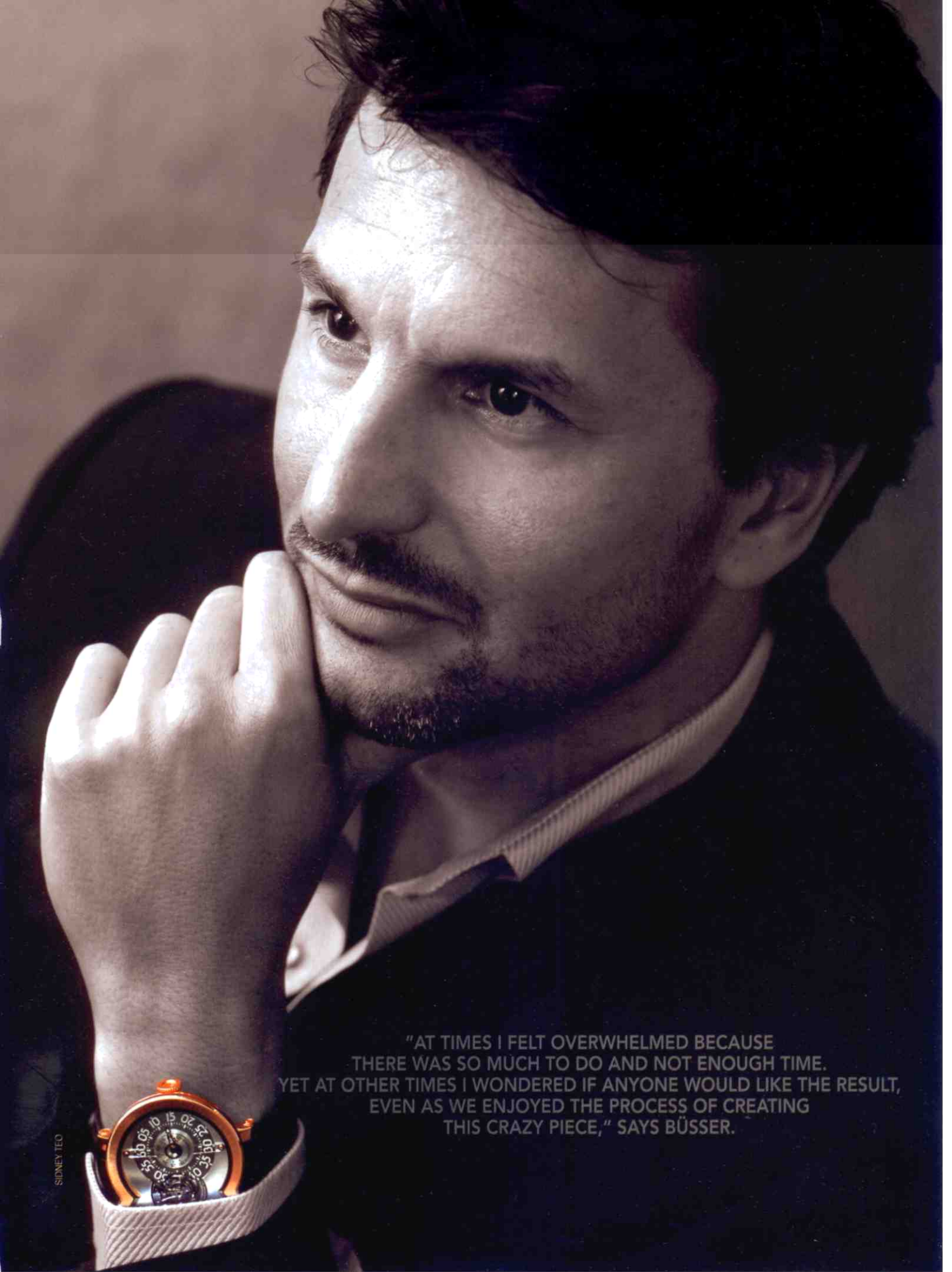
In an industry where innovative creations are churned out to sweep collectors off their feet and loosen their purse strings, nothing comes as a surprise, except when the creative brains behind Harry Winston's Opus project decided to strike out on his own. Max Büsser stunned everyone by trading his cushy role as Managing Director at Harry Winston's Rare Timepieces department for an opportunity to build his own brand — MB & F, also known as Maximilian Büsser & Friends.

At 31, Büsser was at the peak of his career, credited with turning a top jeweller into a highly credible watchmaker. He took the company from eight to 80 staff and generated an increased turnover from CHF8 million (S\$9.8 million) to CHF80 million (S\$98.5 million). But as the man himself puts it, "the more successful we were, the less I was enjoying myself". Perhaps his accelerated success made him tired of the corporate rat race. It was time to fulfil new dreams. "You have to stop when you are at the top of your game," Büsser offers. Dr Bernard Cheong, watch collector and friend of Büsser, describes the man as a guy who "believes in living, rather than being allowed to live".

## MAD MAX

"I come from a pretty Calvinistic background and was constantly instructed to be pragmatic. Yet each time I took a risk, it's paid out 10 times more." Until the age of 18, the shy youngster dreamt of being a car designer and still keeps the miniature models that he made then. He went to engineering school and majored in micro technology. "I hated every minute of it," he admits. Now, Büsser tells his team to keep a child's perspective of the world and believe in the impossible. I ask if he was making up for lost time and he replies matter-of-factly: "I'm making up for all the dreams that I didn't realise as a kid."

This time, Büsser knows what he wants. "I appreciate the luxury of working with people," he asserts. His vision is a collaboration of independent watchmakers. Together, they will present one world premier mechanical timepiece, or a machine, as Büsser puts it. Most importantly, every team member will be credited for his or her involvement. For the critics, Büsser challenges them to log on to the website, where a page is dedicated to every member, and email their enquiries.



"AT TIMES I FELT OVERWHELMED BECAUSE  
THERE WAS SO MUCH TO DO AND NOT ENOUGH TIME.  
YET AT OTHER TIMES I WONDERED IF ANYONE WOULD LIKE THE RESULT,  
EVEN AS WE ENJOYED THE PROCESS OF CREATING  
THIS CRAZY PIECE," SAYS BÜSSER.



Production is limited to 30 watches a year, which he readily acknowledges is a high-risk, low-return project. He had put all his money on the line and even then, was not enough. Büsser then approached six retailers, whom he knew well, to finance his project. One person who shared his vision was Michael Tay

of The Hour Glass. "He asked for my account number and the next thing I knew, the money was in. Even the bankers could not believe it," shares Büsser. But he claims that this project is no money-spinner. "If I was in it for the money, I would be doing fashion watches."

Büsser has chosen to price his first product, the rose gold version of the Horological Machine No. 1 at S\$235,000 although many retailers are convinced he should charge higher. His response to that is that he has no intention of charging customers insane prices, most of which are marketing and advertising dollars. He keeps prices in check by rolling out one product with a lifespan of three years. For every model, there will be 100 movements and a production of 30 to 35 timepieces annually. And to further defy market trends, Horological Machine No. 2, which is also a 3D sculptural product, will be priced even lower. Unlike the Opus project, Büsser does not believe in too much continuity in design. No. 2, he insists, will be very different from No. 1.

## CORPORATE REVOLUTION

Another clue to Büsser's 'deviant' behaviour is his car. "It's a TVR and really difficult to drive. When it rains, water seeps in, but I adore it because of the way it has been constructed and because of the fanatics in Blackburn who create everything by hand. They are the antithesis of the massive production company, crafting only 250 cars a year by hand. I want to be part of that," an earnest Büsser shares, adding that he's not



The Horological Machine No. 1 of MB & F is a technical and aesthetic revolution that features an in-house automatic winding movement with a raised one-minute tourbillon carriage in the middle of the 3D, figure-of-eight case. What's more fascinating is the four mainspring barrels that increase precision and alleviate wear and tear, while at the same time allowing for a seven-day power reserve. The watch is packaged with an Etro pinstriped flannel and leather carry bag.

one of those high-salaried corporate types.

"Henri John Belmont asked me during my job interview at Jaeger-LeCoultre if I wanted to be one amongst 200,000 or one amongst three to shape the company. It's better to have a small team of competent, passionate people than a large team of enthusiastic people who need constant guid-

ance," Büsser explains. It should come as no surprise then to hear that he has teamed up with movement engineer Laurent Besse, independent watchmaker Peter Speake-Marin and architect-turned-watch designer Eric Giroud for the multi-dimensional case.

Another valuable lesson he has learnt was in the late Günter Blumlein's words: "Creativity is not a democratic process." "Even when you're creating the most crazy product and have a great team, only one person decides," he emphasises. The late mentor was very respectful of everyone and never allowed power to go to his head. Still, the dynamic leader was known to be a very tough man. Büsser was, as Dr Cheong says, "one of Blumlein's blue-eyed boys". "He was a gentleman. If one day I could be in that sort of league, I would be a very happy man," says Büsser.

One can sense that Büsser is happier now, living out his aspirations. He's most proud about having found his 'second family' and says he sometimes needs to pinch himself to see if it's real. "I'm still amazed that these incredibly talented people enjoy working on my projects." However, the adrenaline rush has not clouded Büsser's keen business acumen. The risks he takes are calculated and he insists that he will only work with reliable partners whom he has worked with before and have become friends over his career. But it may take another few years to see if Büsser's concept is sustainable. "At the end of the day, if it doesn't work out and I lose all my money, at least I did what I needed to do. And had a whale of my time in the process." ▲