

HELPING HANDS

A new spirit of brotherhood in the world of high watchmaking is producing dazzling results, says Nick Foulkes.

One of the most memorable lines about Switzerland is delivered by Orson Welles in *The Third Man*: "In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock."

Notwithstanding the fact that the cuckoo clock originated in the Black Forest, I mention it because there has been a recent outbreak of brotherly love in the very industry that Welles was poking fun at. I wonder what he would have made of the following announcement, issued by a newcomer to the horological scene: "Confreie Horlogere is not a product but an instrument promoting such values as labour, creativity, craftsmanship, membership in a community, respect and, foremost, the freedom of men and women of good will." It sounds like the Geneva office of the United Nations has got competition on its hands.

The Confreie Horlogere is the creation of Mathias Buttet, founder and CEO of BNB Concept SA, less of an instrument promoting

the brotherhood of man than a specialist maker of complicated movements for the watch trade. In five years BNB has grown from a handful of watchmakers into a company with around 100 employees, many of them in their 20s and 30s. And as the companion of youth is ambition, Buttet decided to invite his most promising watchmakers to become companions of the Confreie Horlogere and make pieces that would bear their names.

So as well as the feelgood element there is a motivational side to the Confreie in that it allows talented young watchmakers to put their names to pieces rather than toil anonymously on projects for bigger brands. Each companion is expected to make a limited run of up to 10 signed pieces. An example is Rainer Mliicher's Bel Canto Minute Repeater Tourbillon (pictured above right, price on request), which has bridges decorated to resemble a map of Italy and the Mediterranean. In coming years the companions are expected to reverse the customary industry approach of diluting the complicated headline piece

and releasing progressively less complex and more affordable versions of it, in favour of making more elaborate and

commensurately pricier timepieces. In this, the Confreie will have to look for the goodwill of final customers as well as fellow companions.

They will, in short, need friends, and one man who is getting by with some help from his friends is Max Büsser, eponymous proprietor of Maximilian Büsser and Friends (MB&F). Sporting Converse All Stars and jeans, Büsser is the stylishly casual face of contemporary watchmaking. He is disarmingly candid

about the motivation behind his cooperative venture. "MB&F allows me to create pieces that 99 per cent of the planet don't like and wouldn't wear." And, he might have added, couldn't afford. As expensive as they are outlandish, ranging from SF166,000 (about £39,270) to almost SF200,000 (about £119,000), Büsser's watches flaunt their wheels, cogs, pinions and inner workings, meriting the appellation "horological machines".

"Mega-brands have wanted us to believe that horology is about luxury, prestige, great sportsmen and celebrities, but for me horology is about the incredible craftsmen and women who create the piece. Each year I



assemble my crew to create the piece I have in mind," he says. Often the craftsmen with whom he collaborates are famous within the industry, but unknown outside. "MB&F is about crediting every single person who has worked on the product," Büsser says. He is as good as his word, mentioning everyone right down to the suppliers of the humblest components. One such is Salvatore Ferrarotto, the cog-maker for Horological Machine No3 (pictured below, £50,700), an hours, minutes and date watch, which, says Büsser, looks like "18th-century watchmaking

Below: MB&F's Horological Machine No3, £50,700. **Top right:** movement of Confreie Horlogere's Bel Canto Minute Repeater Tourbillon, price on request.

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