

# “New technology has no meaning if it does not stir emotions”

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIQUE RENAUD

The master-watchmaker is devoting his third professional life to revisiting the fundamental principles of mechanical horology. The first stage is to redesign the heart of the watch and to release it from theoretical limits – yet without venturing beyond the reach of tradition.

**D**ominique Renaud effectively accompanied the entire haute horlogerie revival in the late 1980s, by breaking with the customs prevailing in the industry. In 2000 he then left everything behind him, before returning 12 years later to found his own start-up. The only structure within which he feels able to express the full measure of his creativity.

**Let's start from the beginning: what is the DR01?**

DR01 is a research project, a path to break out of what is already being done and to rethink mechanical horology. An opening rather than a culmination, since there will always be plenty of unknown factors.

**That deserves an explanation. The watch costs one million Swiss francs and yet it is not complete? Did I understand you correctly?**

It's important to distinguish between two things. The watches sold will indeed be finished, but they are part of a much broader project that involves entirely redefining the fundamentals of the discipline, and I felt it would take at least 12 prototypes to lay the foundations, hence the name “Twelve first”. These 12 watches, all highly demonstrative in formal terms, are designed as manifestoes. They represent the first stage of this process which is, as I implied, about an opening for the entire industry through which to leave the beaten tracks taken for centuries since the invention of the sprung balance.

**So you are once again attempting to spark a revolution, just as you did with Giulio Papi in the late 1980s by reinventing Grand Complications. Is that right?**

I don't know whether I'm revolutionising anything. I am above all a creative who knows the profession inside out, but who reasons in an ingenious manner.

**Does the industry really need to embark on such an experimental venture at this juncture?**

Watchmaking has experienced pivotal moments, but one had a sense of reaching a kind of dead-end, running around in circles as one might expect with so many tourbillons... and that we were no longer able to push the boundaries and step beyond the the-



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The importance of maintaining a stable, known mechanism: basically just a hinge.

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*“Today's mechanical watch is no longer about telling the time, but instead about creating desire, and that means remaining innovative. Taking risks. Being unafraid to challenge fundamental principles.”*

oretical and practical limits imposed by the sprung balance.

**Isn't the industry driven by its capacity for innovation and improvement?**

That's often the problem: when a system works well, we often confine ourselves to the idea of merely improving it rather than thinking out of the box. Over the past decades, watchmaking has mainly based its work on historical inventions, those of pioneering horologists, while adding small evolutions, rather than daring to make a clean break.

**So you've just taken a major step that will serve the entire industry?**

If such is the case, it is being done with all humility. We're at the very start of the story. The solutions we have found are empirical, risky and a great deal remains to be done. What we have been able to observe is that the system performs fairly well.

**Why be so modest about the accomplishment? In just two years of research, you have succeeded in making your entirely mechani-**

**cal, hairspring-free escapement operate at more than 10 Hertz, instantly shattering all previous records in this category.**

Honestly, just seeing this heart beating is extraordinary in itself. I thought things might be far worse, and even that it might not work at all.

**You are not alone in seeking to explore new paths in watchmaking, but there is something that makes you stand out: your determination to avoid innovating beyond the scope of watchmaking itself. Are you distrustful of new technologies?**

For me, it was indeed fundamental to stick to something mechanical, stable and even traditional: basically a hinge. Innovation is only valid if it is comprehensible and accessible to everyone and if all watchmakers are able to understand what we are doing. Nor should one lose sight of the fact that the true purpose of today's mechanical watch is no longer to tell the time, but create desire. A new technology has meaning only if it is extremely visual and generates emotions.

**Watchmaking currently appears to be more conservative than ever, clinging to its values and its icons. Does the industry really need such a clean break?**

You're right; it's not easy to change our ways. While there is a real appetite for innovation, there is also a real sense of distrust about moving beyond a thin, round, traditional watch. Yet innovation is vital, because it alone can ensure a future for watchmaking. And without wanting to make an unjustified comparison, if there had been no Breguet, there would be no watchmaking as we now know it. And remaining innovative means taking risks and not being afraid of tackling fundamental principles.

**How indeed do you explain the fact that it is so hard to innovate with regard to these fundamentals?**

I'm convinced that we are getting back to that now. For a long period, the evolution of the watch industry was above all driven by the quest for chronometric precision, by improving existing elements. This paradoxically led to quartz and ended up rendering

this timekeeping function entirely obsolete. In parallel, watchmaking also began expressing itself in a far broader creative field, that of mechanical art, essentially expressed through complications. But here too, we have reached a dead-end. By revisiting the fundamentals and starting over from there, we are opening up a new path of development.

**One of your distinctive characteristics is your determination to spark this revolution on your own. Why choose a start-up model rather than the comfort of a large company?**

So as to be able to express myself and give free rein to my intuition! It was unthinkable to conduct our research under the constraints and pressures exercised by investors, and the start-up naturally appeared to us as the natural framework for authentic freedom of expression, even for the wildest ideas. I was looking for the best formula to ensure a maximum of independence, and that's when I met Luigino Torrigiani (co-creator of Solar Impulse SA) and the structure took on its final form.

**Does that mean that the industry is incapable of looking beyond its certainties?**

Let's just say that forging one's own path within such a context is no easy task.

**You nonetheless got a good response from the industry when you launched your own manufacturing company with Giulio Papi and you were able to completely reinvent the minute-repeater. Doesn't that contradict what you're saying now?**

In actual fact, we were lucky to have been supported by a visionary such as Günther Blümlein, who ordered two minute-repeaters: one for IWC and the other for Jaeger-LeCoultre. After that, people mostly asked us to update historical complications. There was always a great deal of distrust with regard to inventiveness and creativity.

**Is that why you left Renaud & Papi when it was taken over by Audemars Piguet in 2000?**

I knew that to enjoy this complete freedom, I had to be independent. I may be wrong, but I want to take my ideas to their logical conclusion. It was this same feeling that inspired us to create our own manufacturing company with Giulio Papi in 1986 (Dominique Renaud was 27 years old at the time, and Giulio Papi 22), at a time when nobody else was doing that.

**But that was already a pivotal moment for the industry, wasn't it?**

The industry was indeed seeking to carve out a future for itself at the time. There was considerable demand for mechanical specialities, but the offer was limited to a few watchmakers still capable of assembling movements from scratch. The “missing link” or “trigger” was what we brought to the industry, largely through new computerised technologies, which were still in their infancy at the time.

**You then retired to the South of France for 12 years...**

I actually never stopped making watches. I had kept my atelier. I created models on commission and kept storing up sketches and ideas. In the back of my mind I always wanted to return and at last be able to express myself with complete freedom. I sensed that there was something still to be done, that I had a task I needed to continue, something that I had begun and not yet completed.

Interview by Stéphane Gachet