



Masterclass

AS HIGH-END MECHANICAL WATCHMAKING REGAINS EVER MORE POPULARITY IN THE FACE OF THE MODERN AGE AND ALL ITS INSTANT DISPOSABILITY, MAÎTRES DU TEMPS SHOWS THE WORLD WHAT HAPPENS WHEN HOROLOGY'S GREATEST INDEPENDENT MINDS MEET. BRUCE MELROSE LEARNS FROM ORCHESTRATOR STEVEN HOLTZMAN HOW HIS FIRST SUPERGROUP AND 'CHAPTER ONE' CAME TO PASS >



Far left Exploded view of Maitres du Temps' Chapter One wristwatch, crafted from 558 components. Left Steven Holtzman (right) with Chapter One's 'masters', Peter Speake-Marin (left), Roger Dubuis (centre left) and Christophe Claret (centre right).

For those familiar with the world of high-end watchmaking, it's a formidable line up: Peter Speake-Marin, Roger Dubuis and Christophe Claret, all of them world-renowned artisans at the cutting edge of their craft, and all of them collaborating on a single tour de force watch. It's no wonder that the watch itself is a blend of everything one looks for in an 'haute horlogerie' timepiece – elegance, finesse, complexity, unwavering attention to detail, and genuine innovation.

'Chapter One', as it's simply known, is the first of what promises to be a very special series of wristwatches, all of which will fall under the banner of 'Maîtres du Temps', or 'Masters of Time'. The brainchild of Steven Holtzman – an US watch distributor with over 25 years of experience and a little black book to die for – Maîtres du Temps has a singular remit: "to blend master watchmakers' vast and diverse experience in a collaborative effort to create exclusive and unparalleled masterpieces."

In effect, one could describe Holtzman as a catalyst, bringing these great minds of the Swiss industry together, extracting and distilling the very best of what each has to offer. Though the first 'Chapter' has only recently begun delivery, the next five are already well underway, with no less than 15 horological maestros brought on board – every one an expert in his respective field. This in itself is a relative coup, for the nature of independent watchmakers is, unsurprisingly, independence: strong willed and isolated. With awareness and appreciation of the craft back on the rise, many brands' positions at the vanguard of the industry are dependent on a few genius artisans who increasingly are striking out on their own, satisfying a keen collector's market with low-production, even one-off timepieces executed without compromise. Maîtres du Temps has dared to draw the line between these disparate but brightly burning stars, and has surprised everyone by succeeding.

"Putting several independents together, where everyone has their own solutions and style is obviously a challenge," admits Holtzman. "A big part of Maîtres du Temps is selecting which watchmakers would compliment each other on which project. Certainly, there are some real strong personalities, which is to be expected with independents. But by blending their three different styles and talents, there was a brand new perspective with Chapter One – a blend of something genuinely new."

By providing the opportunity for them to work together, Maîtres du Temps harnesses and maximises its collaborators' incredible talent. Not only this, but it also fosters a valuable cross-pollination of experience. From generation to generation, information can be passed on from the established masters to tomorrow's

masters, promoting a 'masterclass' culture if you like, where emerging stars can blossom directly beneath the auspices of such greats as Roger Dubuis or Daniel Roth, who's working on Chapter Two.

For true high-end watchmaking is a multi-faceted discipline that takes a lifetime to learn. Crafting a mechanical watch's hundreds of minuscule components demands hundreds of different techniques, all of which must be deployed to within extremely narrow tolerances (the micron unit was even invented by a watchmaker) and finished (polished, bevelled, chamfered, blued or engraved) entirely by hand. Such is the uncompromising nature of horology, and such is the culture that Maîtres de Temps embraces. "People increasingly want to see the 'hands' behind the watches and the brands," affirms Holtzman.

In keeping with the best of complicated watchmaking, Chapter One is a veritable symphony of 558 components, interacting with hypnotic precision. Having gazed along its voluptuous, compound-curve case – itself a 104-piece triumph of engineering – the eye is immediately drawn to the beating heart of the watch, the tourbillon, framed by a circular window at 6 o'clock. The tiny cage, shaped in Christophe Claret's trademark "CC" motif, spins like a merry-go-round beneath an exquisitely polished three-armed bridge. Its form sits elegantly with the rest of the dial, which displays a chronograph function, operated via a single pushbutton set into the crown at 3 o'clock, as well as retrograde date and second-time-zone hour indicators.

What makes this watch completely unique, however, are the two rollers at either end of the case. Like a slow-motion slot machine, the top one completes a turn once every 28 days to indicate the phase of the moon and the bottom one once a week to indicate the day of the week. To co-ordinate them with the rest of the movement was Chapter One's greatest challenge – transmitting enough power to nudge the rollers on every day, accurately. After all, it's one thing rotating a tourbillon cage, turning three co-axial chronograph hands, two hours and minutes hands and flicking two retrograde hands back and forth – it's another thing turning two relatively massive metal cylinders as well!

"I came up with the concept of the rolling bars back in 1999," recalls Holtzman. "I was with Christophe [Claret] in an antique store and saw a clock using a similar system. I told Christophe right then I wanted to do rollers with different features in a wristwatch, one at each end of the case." Despite this early conversation, the first recruit to Maîtres du Temps wasn't Claret, but Roger Dubuis, a highly experienced horloger whose eponymous brand was established in North America by Holtzman when he created Roger Dubuis North America, back in the Nineties.

Below Chapter One is a world-first combination of monopusher chronograph, retrograde GMT and date indicators, tourbillon and roller displays.



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"Dubuis has a real respect for the tradition of horology. He designed the tourbillon cage, the decoration, finishes, and many stylistic touches." Closer inspection of the tourbillon also reveals a subtle but important detail by Dubuis, typical of many throughout the whole timepiece: a window through the movement, which bathes the cage in light, making it glow.

The task of developing and manufacturing Chapter One's brand-new movement fell to Christophe Claret. Since landing his first contract for chiming 'repeater' movements in 1987, he has built in Le Locle what could be the world's most sophisticated manufactory of complicated movements, which has become the first choice for brands with big horological ideas. The intricate stencil work of Chapter One's moonphase roller, for example, could only be achieved with Claret's computer-guided laser cutters, in combination with the man's uncanny knack for achieving the impossible.

In realising the watch as a whole however, independent Briton Peter Speake-Marin was the keystone for *Maîtres du Temps*, bridging Dubuis' traditional approach with Claret's innovative processes. "He held the project together," says Holtzman. "For our first Chapter we needed an experienced veteran with

a firm, steady hand; someone who could say, 'You can't use this material, you can use this material. Peter put everyone together, moderated hundreds of debates; he was instrumental as advisor, technological support, and a reality check.'

Witnessing the official launch of Chapter One in a bustling Geneva hotel suite this April, the enthusiasm and excitement for *Maîtres du Temps* was tangible. As *Maîtres du Temps* toured Asia for 10 days in June, a key market for complicated watches, the reaction to this 'super group' has been more befitting a touring pop group than a collaboration of quietly spoken artisans. The word has spread, and it's clear that by combining the industry's stellar talents, *Maîtres du Temps* has raised the profile of independent watchmaking and boosted a craft that could all too easily be lost in the white noise of the big brands.

There are few who can wait to see how Chapter Two unfolds next year, let alone Three and Four – who will Holtzman pair with whom, and what sort of watch will elicit? Will that sweeping compound-curve case shape become the trademark; will the rollers have different functions? A story has been started, which, for watchmaking's sake, we hope will be never-ending.

Bruce Melrose is a luxury lifestyle writer with five years' experience in the high-end wristwatch market.