

Magnum Opus V

Harry Winston's innovative series closes with a much-discussed timepiece that rekindles the long-gone history of genuine horological daring

The Opus series at Harry Winston Rare Timepieces has, for the time being anyway, reached its final culmination with the fifth model in the series shown this year at BASELWORLD. Of the five Opus productions, it must certainly be said that Opus 3 and the present model Opus V take the cake for daring and innovative conceptualizations. So daring in fact that their appearance in the market formed the cyclonic eye of endless (oftentimes mindless) discussions or attacks on various watch-collector Websites on the Internet.

With the danger of generalization, the knowledge of collectors and even many watchmakers about classical watchmaking is oftentimes exceptional, but sometimes lacks a mechano-stylistic sense of the centuries of tradition and the unbelievable innovations that went on before we even got close to the modern wristwatch.

The bare facts are this: The twentieth century was one of the dullest, most boring periods imaginable for horology compared with previous centuries. Even those guys in tights, plucking their lutes, singing bawdy songs and eating with their fingers during the Renaissance had more ideas about horology than we do today. Our perpetual calendars, celestial star chart indicators and a host of other complicated watches are Lilliputian endeavors compared with what was already invented back then. (My use of the word Lilliputian is deliberately

meant as a pun, since most of the twentieth century's horological activity was spent on the process of miniaturizing the mechanical parts of existing pocket watch movements, not creating new inventions.)

What I am getting at here is that despite all the novelties presented each year at BASELWORLD, Geneva and environs, we are essentially living in a world of horological monoculture. Alas, we don't even know it because we are too busy wondering whether to buy the rose gold version with champagne dial or the previous model with the light gray dial instead of the dark gray one. It is high time that there was general acceptance of the fact that a truly healthy horological environment for the mechanical wristwatch is one in which real diversity reigns. Diversity is the very DNA for the future survival of the industry and the mechanical wonders we enjoy and spend fortunes on.

That does not mean that every daring timekeeper is a marvel or that you have to like it. However, such creations do deserve our full intellectual attention. Watches, despite their mundane and useful nature, share similarities with art. Even if you don't like Picasso, a van Dijk portrait will never look quite the same after having had a brush with Cubism. It is the view-changing experience that counts. And the Opus V fits that bill perfectly in my opinion.



Harry Winston's Opus V
in rose gold: Innovative
and eye-catching.



Felix Baumgartner and Max Büsser
Right: Views of the Opus V, showing front and back



Prehistory of the Opus V

Without taking anything away from Max Büsser, Harry Winston Rare Timepieces' managing director (it was his spark of creativity that saw the potential of Urwerk's design concepts), we must first examine the Urwerk concept that is at the root of the Opus V's creation.

When Felix Baumgartner and Martin Frei began their collaboration to create the Urwerk brand, hands on a watch were a taboo for them. Their idea was literally to go back to the beginning of timekeeping (*ur* in German means the first, oldest, an original source) in order to somehow reconceptualize or adapt the sundial or other nonmechanical timekeeping methods into a new mechanical interpretation for the wrist.

The UR-101 and UR-102 with an orbiting portal for the hours with a minute arc was their first creation, followed by their very popular UR-103 model. This was a great success that quickly sold out and is now being released in various versions, the newest being the UR-103.03 presented at BASELWORLD this year.

The concept of the UR-103 is beautiful in its simplicity of design. Inspired by examples of star wheel calibers from pocket watches, a four-armed cross carrying "numerical satellites" turns slowly against an arc-shaped minute scale to show the time. Without wanting to sound too New Age, the idea has some interesting philosophical aspects that touch the unconscious. The round number discs, their orbital movement and the use of an arc for minutes all somehow conspire to touch upon some ancient planetary or celestial *ur*feeling in the back of one's mind. Something restful, reminiscent of the motion of the heavens at night, resides in the movement of this watch. Especially in the UR-103.03, with the newly designed sapphire crystal opening, the effect of the hour satellites' motion provides a whole different experience of the passing of hours, shifting one's normal fixation with the passage of minutes set into the background.

Another common thread with Urwerk's philosophy that has transferred to the Opus V is the full use of depth in the movement design. This is probably the most difficult thing to get used to, as most watches really are very flat in profile—the dial is most of what we get to see. Eliminate the dial, give the movement an additional role in the visual formula, and the results can be challenging, but also invigorating and fun.

A New Way to Tell Time

The Opus V carries this concept to another stage of development. Here, there are what I would prefer to call



The crown is hidden away under a protector.

Winston stipulated at the beginning was the brand's trademark lugs. It was very much a team effort; we presented our basic design and technical drawings and Harry Winston designed the back of the watch as well as making major contributions to the case. For example, the distinctive crown protector was Harry Winston's idea. It provided valuable input throughout the project.

Were there any major technical challenges?

The retrograde mechanism was not easy to develop. Traditionally a retrograde mechanism is controlled from its center; however, we had the satellite system filling that space. As far as we were aware, nobody had made a successful retrograde mechanism before that did not have a pivot point of its own, so we had no reference to work from. We eventually worked out how it could be done in theory and then had the problem of finding somebody who could make the special ball bearing that circles the satellite and that the minute hand runs on. That was very difficult because it has a very large diameter, yet was extremely flat. It was not certain it could be made. Even the traction spring that returns the minute hand pushed the very limits of what was technically possible to manufacture.

While the general public was fascinated by the look of the Opus V and the revolving satellites, watchmakers who saw the watch knew that the retrograde mechanism was a real horological accomplishment.

And whose idea was it to do that retrograde minute?

The Opus series has always been about fusing the DNA of Harry Winston with an independent

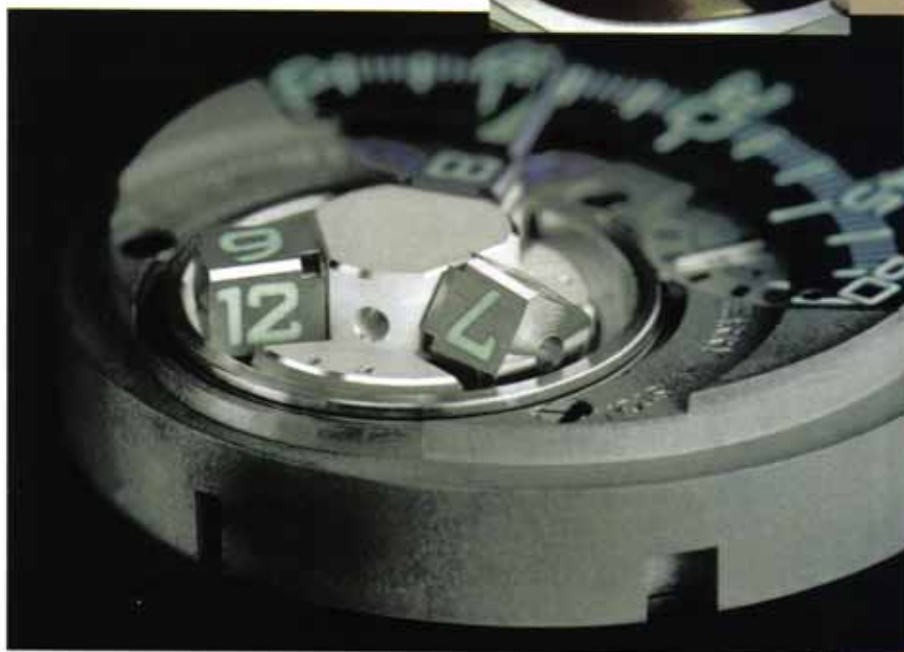
“I had no idea how hard it would be to realize when I first proposed the complication.”

—Felix Baumgartner

watchmaker, and Büsser had put that in our minds at the start.

I came up with the idea of a retrograde minute thinking it would create a good synergy between the satellites of Urwerk and the retrogrades Harry Winston is well known for. I had no idea how hard it would be to realize when I first proposed the complication (*laughing*).

Baumgartner and his team took one year to make a prototype from his “crazy” ideas. The revolving satellite (right and below) was one of those ideas.



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The minute hand bounces slightly after it springs back into position. Is that deliberate or because of its weight?

It is very deliberate. The hand is not as heavy as it looks and we put a special little shock-absorber spring there especially to create that bounce. It adds a bit of fun and does no harm to reliability.

Why is the minute hand to the left of the hour indicator when we usually read time from hours to minutes?

There are a number of reasons for that. Technically it made sense on the left. Aesthetically it helps to balance the visual weight of the hour satellites on the right. However, a

principal reason is that we knew from the research on our own watches that people like to see time indicators move in a clockwise direction. With the minute hand on the left, it traces a clockwise arc along with the hour satellites.

The finish of many of the plates and parts, such as the satellites, is very special. Under certain lights the metal looks like sparkling marble. How do you do that?

That is a secret (*smiling*). It is a micro sandblasting technique that is one of the essential elements of the Urwerk look. I like it very much.

Whenever I turn over an Urwerk watch I always find a surprise, and the Opus V is no exception. Where did the service indicator idea come from?

It just came to me one night and seemed to fit perfectly with the

control board concept of our watches. Functions that are useful, but not needed on a daily basis, can be fitted into the control board leaving the dial free of clutter and easier to read.

I imagine there must have been considerable pressure from Harry Winston to deliver on time.

The whole team, absolutely everybody involved, worked very well together and pulled the whole thing forward. It was a real pleasure to be part of it and working with Büsser and Harry Winston was very smooth.

And what's next for Felix Baumgartner and Urwerk? Will we see an Urwerk-branded Opus V in the future?

For the rest of the year we will be busy making the Opus V's as well as producing our own 103.03. The Opus V is the Opus V and there will not be another. We have many ideas for the future and I am sure something good will evolve from the project (*smiling*).

Ian Skellern is a moderator at ThePuristS.com and Swiss correspondent for International Watch. ☺

The Opus V may have the largest retrograde minute hand ever made.



Left: The satellite system with springs that allow it to rotate in reverse and deliver a deliberate playful bounce to the minute hand when returning to zero
Below: Baumgartner at work

