

# Meeting Mr. Wizard

BY NORMA BUCHANAN

*WatchTime talks to  
the famously brainy  
Ludwig Oechslin:  
professor, historian,  
mathematician,  
philosopher and  
— oh, yes —  
watchmaker.*



“I told him it is possible, but it is stupid.” Ludwig Oechslin laughs when he remembers the answer he gave nearly 30 years ago to Rolf Schnyder when Schnyder asked if it were possible to miniaturize a highly complicated astronomical wall clock Oechslin had made so that it could be worn on the wrist. Why, Oechslin wondered, would anyone want to cram all those indications, which included the apparent position of celestial bodies, solar time, sunrise and sunset times, zodiac signs, solar and lunar eclipses and more, into the tiny space of a wristwatch dial?

But Schnyder insisted. He had just bought the financially moribund Ulysse Nardin brand and was scouring Switzerland for ideas that would get it back on track. Schnyder had seen the clock, an astrolabe, inspired by astronomical clocks from the Middle Ages, in the Lucerne workshop of a master watchmaker and timepiece restorer named Jörg Spöring, for whom Oechslin was working as an apprentice. As soon as Schnyder laid eyes on it, he knew it would be the perfect pick-me-up for his ailing brand. (Schnyder died in April of this year; see following story.)

Oechslin made the movement and Schnyder used it in a watch called the Astrolabium Galileo Galilei, which came out in 1985. As the first watch in the now-celebrated series called the Trilogy of Time, it brought fame to both Oechslin and Ulysse Nardin, thanks to its myriad, and unusual, complications. In 1988, it was featured on the back cover of the *Guinness Book of Records* as “the most highly refined timepiece of all time.”

The Astrolabium was the start of a long partnership. Oechslin designed movements for Ulysse Nardin for nearly 20 years, turning out, among other things, the second and third watches in the Trilogy, the Planetarium Copernicus

and the Tellurium Johannes Kepler; the GMT  $\pm$ , in 1994, a dual-time watch that can be set forward or backward; the Perpetual Ludwig (named after him), a perpetual calendar which, like the GMT  $\pm$ , can be adjusted forward or backward, in 1996; the GMT  $\pm$  Perpetual, in 1999; and the Freak, in 2001, which tells the time not by hands but by means of its movement, rotating once per hour, and featuring a dual, silicon escapement of Oechslin’s design.

By the time the Freak came out, Oechslin was well-established as one of the world’s most famous watchmakers. That year, he took the job he holds today: curator and director of the International Museum of Horology (MIH) in La Chaux-de-Fonds. His work for Ulysse Nardin is finished, at least for now: designing movements for that brand, or any other, is forbidden by the museum because of potential conflicts of interest.

But the 59-year-old Oechslin is as much a watch-world celebrity as ever, recognized everywhere by his signature pince nez and rumpled vest. On a recent trip to La Chaux-de-Fonds, *WatchTime* met with him at the museum to find out about his work there, and to hear firsthand about his life before, during and after the Ulysse Nardin years.

**OECHSLIN IS AN** accidental watchmaker, of sorts. At the University of Basel, he chose a notably non-vocational course of study, which included Latin, Greek, ancient history, philosophy and the history of art. And although he went on to get a doctorate in history; to teach at universities; to write scholarly and, to most of us, indecipherable works on topics we can barely pronounce; and to win universal recognition as a top-notch brain, Oechslin started out as an academic underachiever.

“I wasn’t really good at my studies,” he says. (Although with his owlish face and air of detached circumspection, Oechslin looks as much like a straight-A egghead as anyone possibly can.) “I needed to make money. I needed to find an alternative to survive,” he says. Oechslin had an interest in horology, as he did in

nearly everything, and, after weighing its charms against those of goldsmithing, chose horology because it was intellectually richer.

And so, at age 24, he went searching for a teacher. He asked advice at one of his old haunts: the MIH, which he had often visited while doing research for his work at the university. The museum recommended he apply to become an apprentice with Spöring, who worked in Lucerne, where Oechslin had grown up.

Spöring took him on, and Oechslin soon found himself in Rome, helping to restore an astronomical clock called the Farnese clock, owned by the Vatican. The project took four years and provided inspiration for the wall clock that so intrigued Schnyder.

It was Oechslin’s idea that the Astrolabium should be the first watch in a three-part series. “I thought this [one watch] can’t be alone. It made no sense to just have the Astrolabium,” he says; it would look odd to have one highly complicated astronomical watch in a brand otherwise composed of more mainstream models. He decided to follow up with watches that would show two other perspectives of the solar system. While the first watch showed the heavenly bodies as seen from the Earth, the second watch, the Planetarium, would show the Earth, along with the five other planets closest to the sun, those you can see with the naked eye, as they circled the sun. The third watch, the Tellurium, would offer a view looking down onto the Earth from the North Pole, and show the changing portions of daylight and darkness as the seasons change, as well as the rotation of the moon around the Earth and the resulting phases of the moon.

The perpetual calendar, which Ulysse Nardin first used in a watch in 1996 (in the Perpetual Ludwig, a limited edition), was also Oechslin’s idea. Its chief selling point is that its calendar indications are much easier to set than on a traditional perpetual calendar, which requires many difficult adjustments to reset if the watch is allowed to stop running. Oechslin’s perpetual calendar can, unlike a traditional perpetual calendar, be adjusted either backward or forward



Oechslin with Ulysse Nardin CEO Rolf Schnyder



The watches in the Trilogy of Time (top to bottom): the Astrolabium Galileo Galilei, the Planetarium Copernicus and the Tellurium Johannes Kepler



The GMT ± Perpetual, which can be adjusted backward or forward

(thanks to its use of gears rather than levers) and its day, date and year are synchronized so that they all move together when being reset, rather than requiring separate adjustments. In 1999, Ulysse Nardin paired this perpetual calendar device with another Oechslin innovation, a GMT mechanism that enabled switching from one time zone to another, backward or forward, via pushers. The date changed, when appropriate, with the time-zone switching, and the position of the hour hand with respect to minutes was precisely preserved. The watch was called the GMT ± Perpetual.

Two years later, Ulysse Nardin brought out the Freak. The project was something of a salvage mission, Oechslin recalls. Ulysse Nardin had planned to bring out a watch using a movement design by the watchmaker Carole Forestier-Kasapi, now head of movement development at Cartier, who worked for Ulysse Nardin and Renaud et Papi before taking her present job. But the movement as Forestier-Kasapi designed it was impracticable. Oechslin looked at it and decided that its basic principle, that of a rotating movement, could work if it were executed differently. He increased the move-

ment-rotation speed slightly, to once per hour, and used the escapement bridge to indicate the minutes and the mainspring barrel, which rotates once every 12 hours, to indicate the hour.

The first Freak models contained an escapement called the Dual Direct, which was later replaced by an improved version called the Dual Ulysse. Both had dual escape wheels and were designed to reduce friction.

Ulysse Nardin continued to launch watches with Oechslin-designed movements after Oechslin joined the MIH. These include the Sonata, an alarm watch with a countdown timer and a GMT function, in 2003, and the Moonstruck, in 2009, which shows the apparent position of the sun in the sky, along with the orbit and phases of the moon and the times of neap and spring tides.

There will certainly be others; Oechslin sold Ulysse Nardin many still-unused designs prior to moving to MIH. "Ulysse Nardin has a lot of construction from me that has not yet been made. They have stuff for the next 20 years: things I did before 2001," he says.

**OECHSLIN FOUND** his job at the MIH by answering a help-wanted ad. "This is

one of the two best jobs I could have had; the other was as director of the Swiss Institute of Rome," he says, referring to the institution dedicated to promoting Swiss science and culture in Italy. (Oechslin was born in Italy, in the town of Gabicce Mare on the country's east coast.)

The MIH, founded in 1902, and located since 1974 in a contemporary, underground building with 20,000 square meters of space, is one of the world's most important horological museums. It contains not just the displays open to the public, which span the entire history of timekeeping, from sundials to current wristwatches, but also departments for horological research and timepiece restoration.

When Oechslin got the job he bought a house famous in La Chaux-de-Fonds as one of the town's best examples of early 20th-century Art Nouveau design, for which La Chaux-de-Fonds is well known in architectural circles.

The museum was a relic, too, but of a less appealing sort: it had scarcely been changed since the building had opened and was in need of major work. Oechslin updated the displays, a task that included expanding the amount of written information accompanying them. When the displays were built, visitors had more knowledge about timepieces than they do now, he says. "You didn't need to tell them too much. But today people come in [with little prior understanding] and you really have to explain. This is the main thing I changed." Oechslin's agreement with the museum requires him to spend 60 percent of his time on museum work, and allows him to use the other 40 percent as he chooses.

Of late, much of the 60 percent has been spent organizing an exhibit on American watchmaking called "Philadelphia 1876: le défi américain en horlogerie," or "the American challenge in watchmaking." It's devoted to the 20-to-30-year period following the Civil War when American watch companies, thanks to their use of mass production to make interchangeable parts, rivaled or even exceeded their Swiss competitors in the quality of their products.

**OECHSLIN SOLD ULYSSE NARDIN MANY STILL-UNUSED DESIGNS FOR WATCHES. "THEY HAVE STUFF FOR THE NEXT 20 YEARS," HE SAYS.**

The Freak, introduced in 2001



Photo: Bea Weimann

Oechslin traveled throughout the Northeast visiting museums — the Smithsonian; the Winterthur Collection, in Winterthur, DE; the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, in Columbia, PA; and others — to find pieces for the exhibit, which opened in May and will run through Sept. 30.

Like museum directors everywhere, Oechslin must also raise money for acquisitions, research personnel and restoration. Sources include private donors, banks and watch brands and, not insignificantly, sales of a special watch Oechslin conceived for the purpose, called, simply, the MIH watch. It is an annual calendar that combines an ETA 7750, chosen for its high degree of torque, with a calendar mechanism manufactured by the Zurich watchmaker Paul Gerber, and containing just nine moving parts. The watch is sold online and at the Swiss retailer Embassy, which

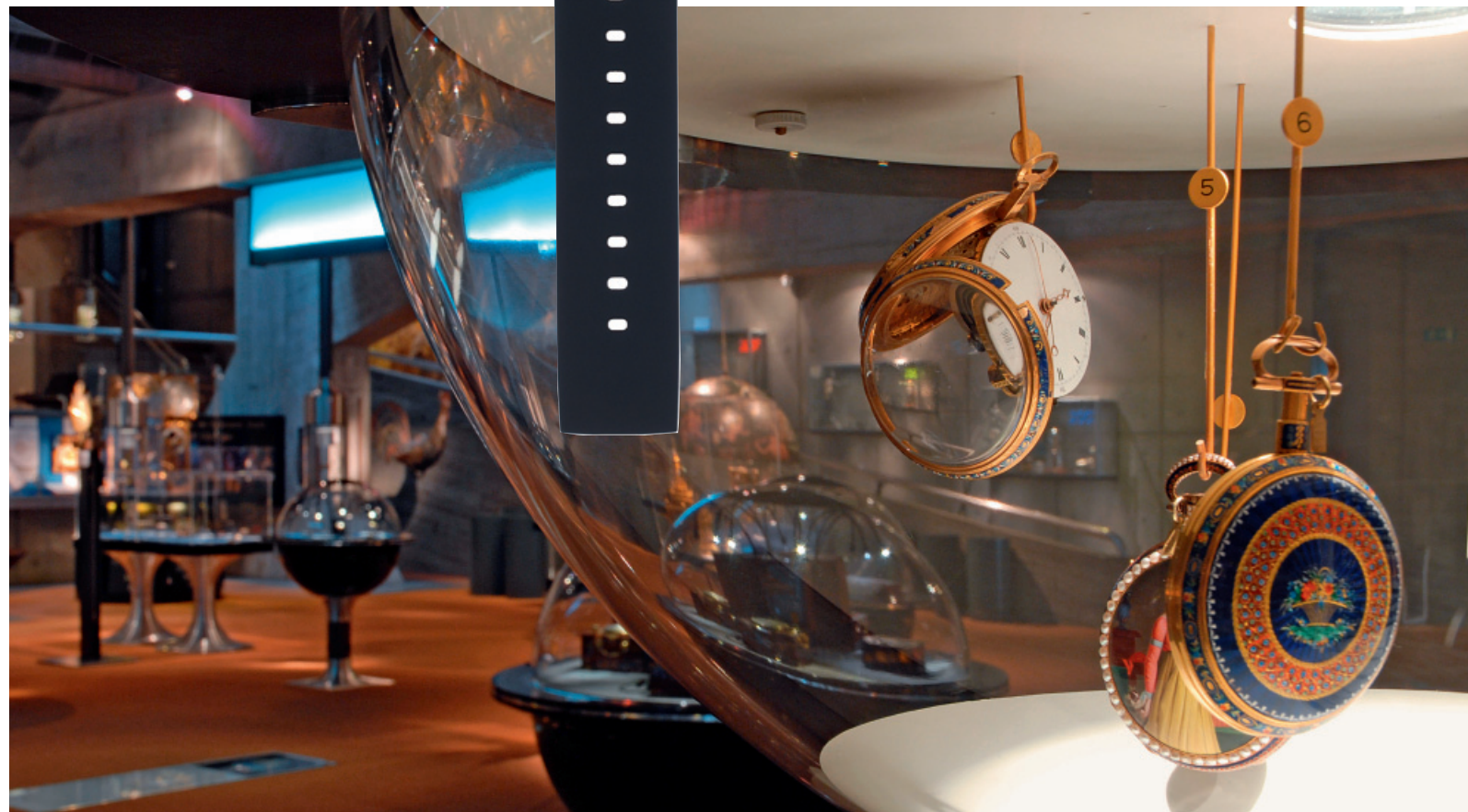


Photo: Bea Weimann

**SALES OF OESCHLIN'S  
MIH ANNUAL CALENDAR  
WATCH HAVE NETTED THE  
MUSEUM WELL OVER  
500,000 SWISS FRANCS.**

*The MIH watch*

*The MIH got a facelift  
when Oechslin took  
over as director.*



has stores in Lucerne and St. Moritz. The watch is priced at 5,000 Swiss francs, 700 of which go to the museum. Oechslin says that since the watch was launched in 2005, between 800 and 900 MIH watches have been sold, netting the MIH well over SF500,000.

Oechslin spends much of the remaining 40 percent of his time on a new venture, a watch brand he founded in 2008 named Ochs and Junior. The brand contains five collections, all of which use unconventional displays to show the calendar or a second-time-zone indication. The watches have a minimalist look; the styling is the work of the industrial designer Christian Gafner. One collection, the Anno Cinquanta, is an annual calendar whose day, date and month indications consist of round apertures arranged in circles: the circles turn orange to indicate the current day and date. Oechslin says this watch was one of the most difficult, and perhaps *the* most difficult, he has ever designed. The reason is that its calendar mechanism conveys so much information with so few parts. "To find a really simple solution is really hard," he says. The movement is an in-house automatic by Paul Gerber. This model, like all Ochs and Junior watches, is sold on the Ochs and Junior website (ochsundjunior.ch) and at the Embassy stores. Its price is SF41,500 for the white-gold version (about \$47,000 at current exchange rates), SF39,500 for the rose-gold one and SF34,850 for the silver-case model.

The other Ochs and Junior watches are the Mese, a calendar watch whose date circle has a spiral shape so that the first and 31st days are stacked on top of each other; the Luna Mese, with the same spiral date indicator but also with a moon-phase display consisting of a round aperture that rotates around the dial, mimicking the rotation of the moon around the Earth; and the Due Ore, which shows two time zones. Prices range from SF6,000 for titanium-case versions of the Due Ore and Mese to SF20,360 for the silver case, white-gold-dial version of the Luna Mese. Ochs and Junior also sells a children's watch, the Settimana Junior (SF2,700), which shows the day of the



Photos: Bea Weimann



*Two watches from the Ochs and Junior collection: the Luna Mese, above, and the Anno Cinquanta, left*

week only because, Oechslin says, that is the only calendar information children need.

It was his own child, his son Giorgio, who came up with the name Ochs and Junior. In German, Oechslin means, loosely, "little ox." (*Ochse* is the German word for "ox" and *lein* is a diminutive suffix.) So Ochs and Junior seemed to the boy, then 15, like a very clever brand name.

Oechslin agrees, in a way. "It's super-stupid," he says, smiling. "It's so stupid, it's good." ○