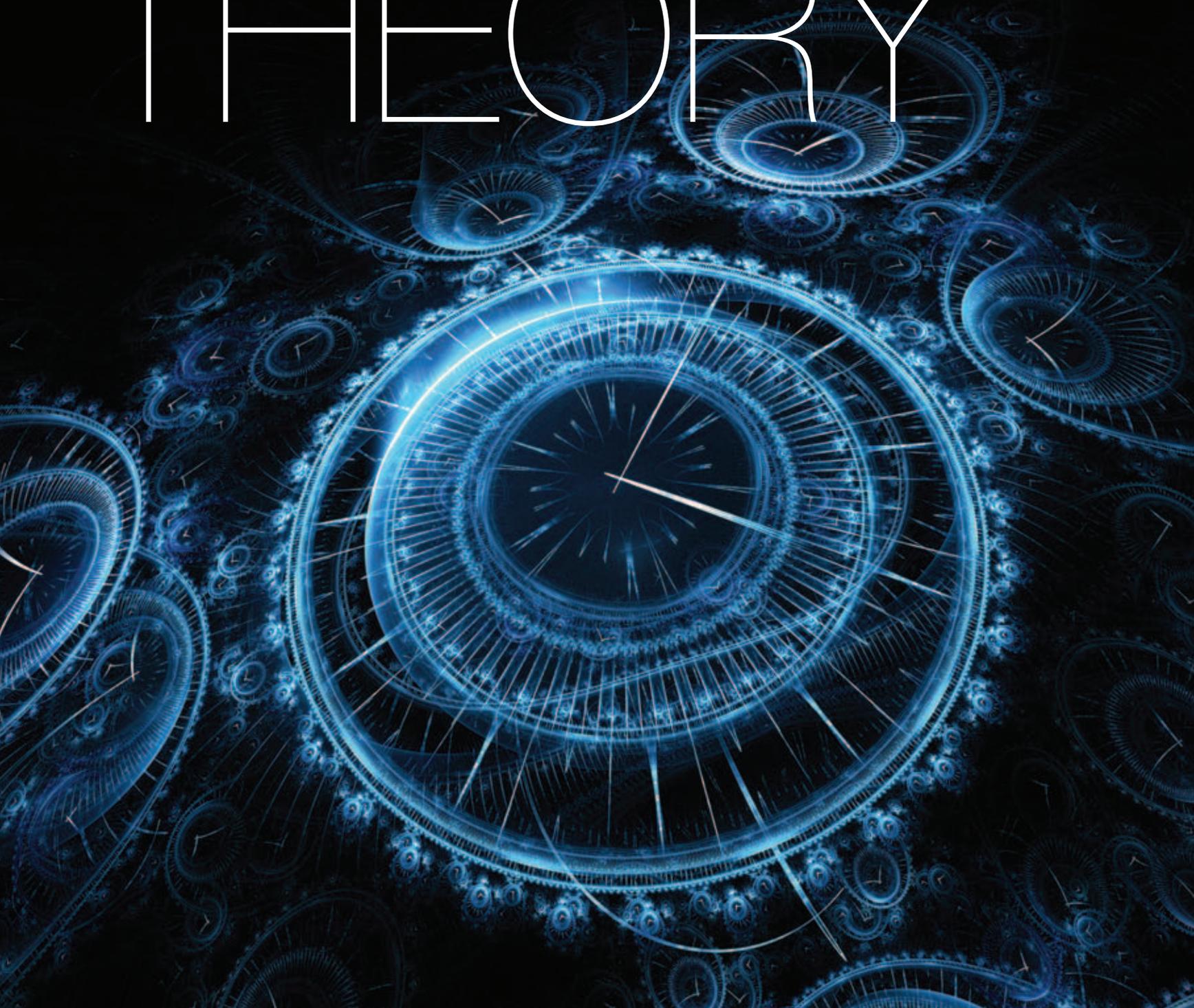


BIG BANG THEORY

The big bang took somewhere between three and 20 minutes to conceive the universe but down on Earth at Hublot Geneve, the creation of the horological equivalent takes a little longer. Hublot boss Jean-Claude Biver reveals the inner workings of the company and the Big Bang timepiece.



It takes a gestation period of about six months before the latest iteration of a Big Bang watch is ready for market. By the standards of the luxury watch industry, that's fast work. Normally a period of one and two years is the standard time for a horological masterpiece to work its way from inspiration to production. But Hublot is a small and highly productive company (actually, 150 people but growing) that the boss regards as a 'kind of club'.

'That's very important in the development of such a watch,' he explains. 'Most of us have known each other for a long time. It means you don't have to talk too much.'

Jean-Claude Biver and managing director Ricardo Guadeloupe have luxury watches in their veins. In some 35 years in the industry, Biver has overseen the development of some 700 watches and Guadeloupe about 200. It all started in 1982 when Switzerland's mechanical watch-making industry faced ruin from Japan's clever, quartz watches. Having bought Blancpain for several times less than a top-priced Hublot watch costs today, Biver nailed his colours to the mast with the immortal words: 'Since 1735, there has never been a quartz Blancpain and there never will.'

It was clearly the right strategy. Last year, Hublot watches picked up a host of awards including three top accolades in November. The company climaxed in a first prize for the Aero Bang Gold Ceramic in the gentleman's category of the Grand Prix du Public at the Nuit de l'Horlogerie in Geneva, plus a second prize for the Big Bang Purple Carat in the ladies' category.

The breakthrough Hublot concept is based on the fusion of traditional,

is the future. That's the beauty of it all, you can't learn it.'

And then of course the thing of beauty has to be sold. To say that the boss of Hublot has a flair for marketing is like describing Cristiano Ronaldo, who wears an Aero Bang, as quite a good footballer. While pursuing the usual marquee opportunities such as polo and sailing, Hublot shocked the industry by aligning itself with professional footballers and, famously, Manchester United. But the proof is in the sales, which have increased tenfold in the last four years.

And it's certainly a premium brand, with the watches costing anything between €17,500 and €64,000 for the Big Bang 41mm Red Gold encrusted with diamantes baguettes. The (very) limited edition 44mm, manually wound Bigger Bang, with no fewer than 269 parts, weighs in at about €150,000.

The advancing economic storms don't seem to deter Biver, who regularly sees tempests roll across Lac Lemman towards Nyon, an old Roman village that surely serves as an emblem of tradition.

'When the wind drops in a regatta, the whole fleet slows down,' he says in a nautical metaphor. 'The goal is to finish the course in front. To do that, your boat has to be light and ship-shape and the skipper extremely alert. It's the same for a business. Management must know exactly what it's doing and costs must be watched carefully. I don't really give a hoot about the slow-down. I'm not so much concerned with my own speed but with the lead I've got over the competition.'

In the meantime Hublot continues to expand, like the universe. ■

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IT STARTS WITH
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Hublot's Jean-Claude Biver.

Swiss watch-making skills with modern, palpable materials such as Kevlar, carbon fibre, natural rubber and ceramics. Carlo Crocco had founded Hublot in 1980 but, heavily involved in philanthropy, ceded control to Biver and his team in 2004.

As Biver tells it, the brand has been revived through a kind of alchemy that fuses tradition and passion, vision and street smarts.

'For a model both of us get a lot of information, influence and inspiration from the market. You can't create a watch in your bedroom or in the office,' he explains. 'Then we swap our vision. Often it's the same, but sometimes one draws more from the other. Next we do drawings in a bad way, with little sketches.'

The in-house designer then converts the sketches into a three-dimensional computer form and scores of fine corrections are made. Next the virtual watch is fashioned into the first prototype to be touched and felt. The team broods over it from every viewpoint.

'We sell image, emotion, dreams, beauty, art,' says Biver. 'It starts with marketing and ends with technical.'

A box-ticking process this is not

'The rules are unwritten in the watch industry,' Biver explains. 'Experience has been transmitted by the hand of the masters, but some things you just know. Ricardo has this in his eyes, and me too. If you build the vision on traditions, you have harmony. Tradition is looking backwards but the vision

BIVER: A LIFE IN WATCHES

Luxembourg-born, Jean-Claude Biver started his working life in the heart of Switzerland's mechanical watch industry in Brassus, in the Joux valley, after studying at the University of Lausanne. At Audemar Piguet he spent a year learning all the disciplines in watch-making – 'penetrating the very soul of the industry', he recalls – before specialising in sales and marketing. In 1980 he joined Omega with responsibility for gold products but returned to hand-crafted watch-making in 1982 when he and friend Jacques Piguet bought Blancpain, dormant for more

than a quarter of a century. Ten years later he sold the revived brand to what later became Swatch Group and assumed responsibility for Omega, now part of the Hayek empire. With new products and a raised profile through celebrities such as Cindy Crawford, Pierce Brosnan and Michael Schumacher, Omega's sales rocketed. In late 2004 Biver returned to a small brand, assuming responsibility for the revival of Hublot as chief executive and chairman. In 2007 Biver was named one of Switzerland's top ten entrepreneurs for 2007 by the Zurich paper *Handelszeitung*.