

## A CUT ABOVE WATCHES

Precision,  
one piece  
at a time

BUDAPEST

Hungarian craftsman  
revives a tradition with  
elegance and innovation

BY PALKO KARASZ

Hidden among steep and meandering streets in a hillside district of this capital city is the workshop and family home of the independent watchmaker Aaron Becsei, the only Hungarian member of the prestigious Académie Horlogère des Créateurs Indépendants, or A.H.C.I., of Basel, Switzerland.

Trained in watchmaking and mechanical engineering with a diploma from the Budapest School for Arts and Services and a degree from Budapest Polytechnic, Mr. Becsei, 32, completed his first clock, his Miniature Double Pendule Zappler, in 2003.

Only 20 millimeters, or less than an inch, high, the elaborate mechanism features two tiny pendulums with gold, ruby-set sun-shaped weights swinging from jeweled bearings. A gold face, supported by a body intricately engraved in leaf patterns, recalls the neo-Classical Empire style that Mr. Becsei got a taste for during visits to Vienna.

He displayed his Tourbillon No. 1 and Miniature Zappler table clocks in 2007 at the Baselworld watch fair while he was a candidate for membership in the Basel Académie and has continued to create unique pieces ever since.

The son and grandson of clockmakers, Mr. Becsei “grew up surrounded by watches,” he said during a recent interview at his workshop.

Like his father and grandfather, he started by repairing old timepieces,

Mr. Becsei produces only 5 to 10 pieces a year, with a long list of orders already placed.

learning to make the replacement components for old watches that were no longer available from the original makers. After a while, he said, “I realized I could manufacture any of those pieces, so what kept me from making my own watch?”

He created his own brand, Bexei, and completed his first wristwatch under that label in 2008.

In making his pieces, Mr. Becsei had to rely on his personal experience: Watchmaking is a nearly extinct tradition in Hungary. Clocks were made in Hungarian workshops under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. After World War II, during the Communist era, a state-run factory made clocks that had been designed in the Soviet Union. Mass production of watches and clocks



and balance wheel, is meant to improve accuracy by compensating for the effects of gravity on the timepiece. Mr. Becsei introduced his own patented tourbillon case using only synthetic ruby bearings rather than the more common ball bearings.

Elegantly domed, the sapphire crystal reveals a mechanism made of more than 100 components, weighing 1.5 grams, or one-twentieth of an ounce. The three carriages complete a cycle at different speeds every 12.5 minutes. Within that time span, the balance wheel takes 3,750 different positions, which are visible from the front and the transparent back, as well as through a window on the side.

Mr. Becsei, who prides himself on his design and unique parts, placed an engraved face on Primus, recalling the abundant leaf and floral motifs in Empire style from his first Miniature Zappler.

When first shown in Basel in 2008, “Primus brought me real professional recognition,” the watchmaker said, as he removed the prototype of the timepiece from a vintage strongbox, a temporary home for his creations.

“The first time I saw Aaron’s work, I understood he had great potential to become a worthy member of A.H.C.I.,” Vincent Calabrese said by e-mail. Mr. Calabrese was a founding member of the academy and became Mr. Becsei’s mentor.

Introducing Primus opened the doors to a series of exhibitions for the young craftsman. He has displayed his creations at the Tokyo International Watch Fair. In 2009, he was elected a member of A.H.C.I. He went on tour with other members in Beijing, Shanghai and

The independent watchmaker Aaron Becsei, a third-generation horologist, in his workshop in Budapest. The Dignitas, in a rendering above right, shows that austerity is relative. The heart of the Primus, below right, is its triple-axis tourbillon mechanism.

wheels, is undergoing testing for its first client. Ordered with a number of extras, the timepiece had a price close to €50,000.

In a back room of his workshop, a glass cabinet displays antique German- and Swiss-made tools next to Mr. Becsei’s self-made utensils. While making the Primus wristwatch, for instance, he meticulously created a special metal tool to hold the fragile outer cage of the tourbillon while piercing just one bore in the right direction. Opposite the display case, a high-temperature oven bakes the enamel that colors the Bexei logo in black on the watch cases. A large poster on the wall displays the Primus with all its com-



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF BEXEI

plications, illustrating both the complexity and precision of Mr. Becsei’s work.

Working alone in all phases of production, Mr. Becsei does not plan to begin large-scale production of his watches. The Dignitas collection, however, promises a series of more austere pieces, taking up the best from previous designs. Two watches of the collection exist only on paper, but plans reveal a domed crystal and self-designed case similar to those of Primus as well as elaborate engravings and handmade components.

The most complicated piece of the collection, the Dignitas Tourbillon Diagonal, still has some surprises. A diagonally placed tourbillon mechanism is meant

to accommodate the two main positions timepieces take: on the wrist by day and on the desk by night.

The meticulous work takes time, and Mr. Becsei can produce only 5 to 10 pieces a year, with a long list of orders already placed. As a result, the workshop might soon need a helping hand, he said.

Surprisingly, Mr. Becsei does not wear a watch. “I have a couple of watches from my father’s collection,” he said. “But when I started making watches, I pledged not to wear one before I have the time to make one for myself. So for the moment, I’m waiting for that to happen.”



A euro coin providing a reference to a 20-millimeter-tall movement. Mr. Becsei is the only Hungarian in the Académie Horlogère des Créateurs Indépendants of Basel, Switzerland.

continues today, but those models carry mechanisms designed abroad.

“The profession here has been confined to changing batteries,” Mr. Becsei said, adding that in Hungary, only a handful of enthusiasts still made parts for mechanical timepieces. Behind his desk, a grandfather clock made during the Austro-Hungarian Empire strikes on the hour.

With his father, Mr. Becsei went exploring in watch museums all around Europe as soon as borders opened up in 1989. He also assembled a collection of specialized books, most of which were available only outside Hungary, including works by the late British independent watchmaker George Daniels, who was his role model.

Encouraged by the warm welcome given to his first clocks by the A.H.C.I. and Baselworld, Mr. Becsei began designing a wristwatch. Two years in the making, Primus was born in 2008 as a mix of art and engineering.

The heart of the Primus is a triple axis tourbillon mechanism, which only a handful of watchmakers have managed to complete until now. First made in the late 18th century, the tourbillon, a rotating cage that contains the escapement

Hong Kong last year.

The first Primus made after the prototype has already found an owner, a Hungarian-born collector in Switzerland. The price was more than €100,000, or more than \$130,000. Mr. Becsei said he planned to build only nine pieces of the model.

Much like his wristwatch, the Budapest workshop is a fair reflection of Mr. Becsei’s diverse art. “While making watches, I have to update my set of tools constantly,” he said, calling it a difficult task in a country with few resources for clockmakers.

Next door to the garden-level office where he greets clients and visitors, hidden behind a large opaque glass screen, is a watchmaker’s dreamland. The dark wooden workbench that once belonged to his grandfather is a far cry from the cutting-edge machinery lined up right behind it, like the custom-made precision lathe. On the desktop, a glass bell shelters the first piece of his next collection of wristwatches called Dignitas, still in the making.

The Dignitas Power reserve, with its computer-designed but hand-executed titanium balance, platinum screws and an 18-carat gold gear train and golden

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