



Vogue: Oyster Story Opening Event / August 2026

Oyster Watches: How Have They Spent a Remarkable Century?

An Oyster Story

If the only peak you climb every day is the morning rush hour, why wear a watch that has been to Everest?

At a time when smart devices seem to need charging every few steps and become obsolete within three years, perhaps what draws us to Rolex Oyster watches is the profound sense of security they offer—one that transcends the present moment. Since its birth in 1926, the Oyster has represented the ultimate pursuit of excellence. Over the past century, an invention originally designed to guard against a few drops of rain and specks of dust has accompanied humankind across the English Channel, into the abyss, and to the summit of Everest.

As a Tool: Up Mountains and Into the Sea

More than a century ago, Rolex founder Hans Wilsdorf was preoccupied with two things: moisture and dust.



“We all know that pivots must be oiled in order to operate, yet lubricating oil easily attracts fine dust. Although the amount of dust may be small, regardless of how well a watch case is constructed, it gradually accumulates and enters every watch movement. As the pivots rotate, the oil slowly thickens into clumps over time, and dust may become mixed in with it. These deposits act like sandpaper against extremely delicate pivots and pinions, gradually wearing them down. The wear may be tiny, but it is enough to affect timekeeping accuracy.”

In the early twentieth century, wristwatches were like precious orchids in a greenhouse: beautiful and full of life, but fragile. A few tiny droplets of water or particles of dust could cause the oils in their precision mechanisms to coagulate.

In 1926, Hans Wilsdorf's long-held obsession led to a solution now regarded as legendary: a patented hermetically sealed case comprising a screw-down bezel, case back and winding crown. He called it the **Oyster**.

“The watch can remain submerged in water for a long time, like an oyster, without any harm to its components. This inspired me to name it the Rolex Oyster.”

From then on, wristwatches acquired another character. No longer a greenhouse flower, they became like an oyster: tightly closed, strong and dependable. But Hans Wilsdorf believed that exceptional quality could not exist merely in laboratory data. He wanted to test the Oyster in some of the world's most extreme environments and thereby prove its performance.

Rolex's first ambassador was Mercedes Gleitze, the first British woman to swim across the English Channel. In 1927, she wore an Oyster watch during her crossing. After more than ten hours in the water, the watch was still working perfectly. To celebrate this historic feat and publicise Rolex's watchmaking prowess, Hans Wilsdorf placed an advertisement on the front page of the *Daily Mail*, announcing the triumph of the waterproof watch. He declared it the beginning of the Rolex Oyster watch's “worldwide triumph.”

Beginning with Gleitze, Hans Wilsdorf turned the whole planet into Rolex's open-air R&D centre. If icy seawater could not damage the watch, what about the bitter cold and low pressure at high altitude?



In 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay stood on the summit of Mount Everest, leaving humanity's first footprints on the highest point on Earth. Beneath the sleeves of their heavy polar clothing, Rolex watches accompanied them on that ascent.

In 1960, in the Pacific Ocean near Guam, Swiss oceanographer Jacques Piccard and U.S. Navy Lieutenant Don Walsh descended in the *Trieste* bathyscaphe to a depth of 10,916 metres—the deepest point of the Mariana Trench. An experimental Rolex Deep Sea Special attached to the outside of the vessel successfully withstood water pressure of more than 10 tonnes per square centimetre. When the submersible resurfaced, the watch was still keeping time. Jacques Piccard later sent Rolex a telegram:

“I am happy to confirm that your watch is as precise at 11,000 metres as it is on the surface. Congratulations.”



Thus, what had begun as a stubborn determination to fight a few grains of dust and droplets of water became a century-long endurance test at the highest and deepest places on Earth.

In 1967, U.S. Air Force test pilot William J. Knight flew the X-15 rocket plane and set a world airspeed record that remains unbeaten: Mach 6.72. On his wrist was a Rolex GMT-Master. Two weeks later, during the X-15's 180th flight, he reached an altitude of 80 kilometres—officially qualifying Knight as an astronaut.

In 1970, Jack Swigert wore a GMT-Master throughout the dramatic Apollo 13 lunar mission. Upon returning to Earth, he immediately left a message for Rolex director René-Paul Jeanneret:

“To my old friend René Jeanneret: thanks to your help, everything was on time. My deepest thanks.”

In 2010, eight pioneering expedition members undertook an ambitious Arctic challenge: the **Deepsea Under the Pole** expedition. Its purpose was to explore the waters beneath the Arctic ice and observe ecosystems being damaged by global warming. During 45 days, the team repeatedly dived beneath the ice. Their luggage included cameras, video equipment—and five Rolex watches. After the expedition, Emmanuelle Périé-Bardout, the team's only female member, said:

“The only diving instrument that worked properly throughout the expedition was our Rolex watch—the Rolex Oyster Perpetual Deepsea.”



At Its Core: Perpetual Motion

The Oyster watch, introduced in 1926, symbolised modern style and human achievement through its innovative waterproof case. It later became the foundation for numerous Rolex collections. A century after its debut, these watches continue to evolve.

The **Oyster Perpetual**, launched in 1931, combined a waterproof case with automatic winding. Today, it remains many people's first Rolex; the centenary model introduced for the Oyster's hundredth anniversary also belongs to the Oyster Perpetual collection.

In 1945 came the **Datejust**. Building on the Oyster Perpetual, it added a date window and became the world's first self-winding, waterproof, chronometer-certified wristwatch with a date display at 3 o'clock.

In 1953, the **Explorer** and **Submariner** were launched. The former enabled explorers to read the time clearly in high-altitude and extreme-cold environments. The latter, the first diver's watch waterproof to 100 metres, featured a rotating bezel that allowed divers to calculate immersion and decompression times precisely.

The **GMT-Master**, introduced in 1955, was equipped with a 24-hour hand and a two-colour rotating bezel, enabling it to display time in two time zones simultaneously and meet pilots' specific needs. It was followed by the **Day-Date** and **Milgauss** in 1956, the **Air-King** in 1958, the **Cosmograph Daytona** in 1965, the **Sea-Dweller** in 1967, and, in 2025, the **Land-Dweller**.

These many Oyster watch collections are new forms of armour developed from the original Oyster to address the real needs of different environments.





Throughout this long Oyster journey, Rolex has moved forward alongside people who shape the future. From the earliest explorers to outstanding athletes, artists and scientists, they build legends in their respective fields through exceptional skill, dedication, remarkable talent and the ability to inspire those who follow.

This pursuit of excellence drives the partners of the **Perpetual Arts Initiative**, whose extraordinary talents have had a profound impact on global culture. By supporting masters of emotional expression and the institutions in which they perform, Rolex helps preserve and pass on the values it holds dear.

Its commitment to the future is also reflected in the **Perpetual Planet Initiative**, supporting people who share expertise and work to address today's environmental challenges. These changemakers carry forward the spirit of early explorers, advancing our understanding of the world in order to find ways to protect it. Created in 1976 to mark the Oyster watch's fiftieth anniversary, the **Rolex Awards for Enterprise** have supported 165 Laureates to date, whose projects have had a far-reaching impact in around 67 countries and regions.

Thus, the promise of water resistance made in 1926 completes a grand circle. The innovative spirit that gave birth to the Oyster still shapes its essence today: a Rolex is not only about the precision of a seconds hand, but also about how humanity can maintain a dependable, enduring and perpetually active relationship with the world in an age of rapid change and uncertainty.





Sonya Yoncheva: Performing Opera Is a Psychological Game, Like Watchmaking

Echoes of Time

At Shanghai's West Bund Dome Art Center, Rolex ambassador and world-renowned soprano **Sonya Yoncheva** opened the centenary celebration of *Oyster Perpetual: An Oyster Story* with a deeply moving performance of "Hymne à l'amour." It would be hard to imagine that this radiant star of the stage was, in private, originally a shy and introverted person.

The day after the performance, we sat down with her to talk about how, in an age accustomed to receiving dopamine hits in 15 seconds, young audiences can be drawn back to three-hour classical operas; and how an art form with a history of five centuries can resonate with the century-old Rolex Oyster.

Q: Last night's performance was a wonderful surprise. How did you choose that song?

A: I recommended several songs to Rolex. When choosing, we focused on the meaning conveyed by the piece. The song we selected is about love and selflessness, which fits the theme of the *Oyster Perpetual: An Oyster Story* exhibition particularly well. Judging from the audience's reaction, it blended modern style and bel canto beautifully.





Q: Many audience members were hearing opera for the first time last night. They were deeply moved even without understanding the words. How can singing convey emotion across language barriers?

A: The human voice is a wonderful instrument. Whether or not people share the same language or background, they can always receive the emotions within a voice. And every person's vocal timbre is unique, which is deeply moving in itself.

For me, my voice is my strength, so I must use it well and give it as much emotion as possible. For a performer, conveying emotion is the most important mission. Often, we have only three minutes, so we must do everything we can to move every listener within that time.

Q: Opera has a history of hundreds of years, and classic roles have well-established performance traditions. How do you balance classical interpretation with your individual style?

A: It varies from person to person. Opera combines singing, acting and personal charisma. Its breadth gives performers room to express their individuality. On stage, I interpret characters through my own understanding. I strongly believe that every performer should have a distinctive quality; only then can they reveal the richness and charm of a role on many levels.

Q: How would you define your own performance style?

A: I have a stage personality! I need to be on stage, and I particularly enjoy it—it is probably where I can express myself with the greatest freedom. I used to be very introverted and was shy in daily life. My first experience on stage as a child was terrible: there were so many people in the audience, the lights shone on me, and I was completely at a loss. I could barely bring myself to step forward. But now I cannot live without the stage.

On stage, I am the complete opposite of how I am in everyday life. There, I can be fully myself—and that is what I love most about this profession.

Q: When did you first decide that you wanted to become a singer?

A: Very early on. I began by studying piano because my mother always wanted me to be exposed to classical music, and I came to love it too. Later, by chance, I heard a girl singing and was instantly captivated. She was very young and beautiful, singing a cappella, and I thought: this is the most beautiful thing in the world.

That was how I fell in love with it and decided to give it a try. My mother also thought I had talent. I began studying with a teacher, who said, "My goodness, this child is worth nurturing." And so I started down this path.

Q: Attention spans are now generally fragmented, while opera can be very long. How do you view the contrast between classical opera and today's pace of life?

A: Opera is like an emotional space. The characters in classics such as *Tosca* and *Norma* experience troubles and struggles that are no different from those of modern people. People can always find resonance in opera; that is something that transcends time.



But opera is indeed long for this era. People are now used to short videos that deliver dopamine in seconds, whereas a full opera generally lasts three hours. I once went to Japan to see a kabuki performance that lasted four hours. In the past, people were willing to slow down and appreciate long-form art, but life is becoming ever faster. That is the gap we need to bridge.

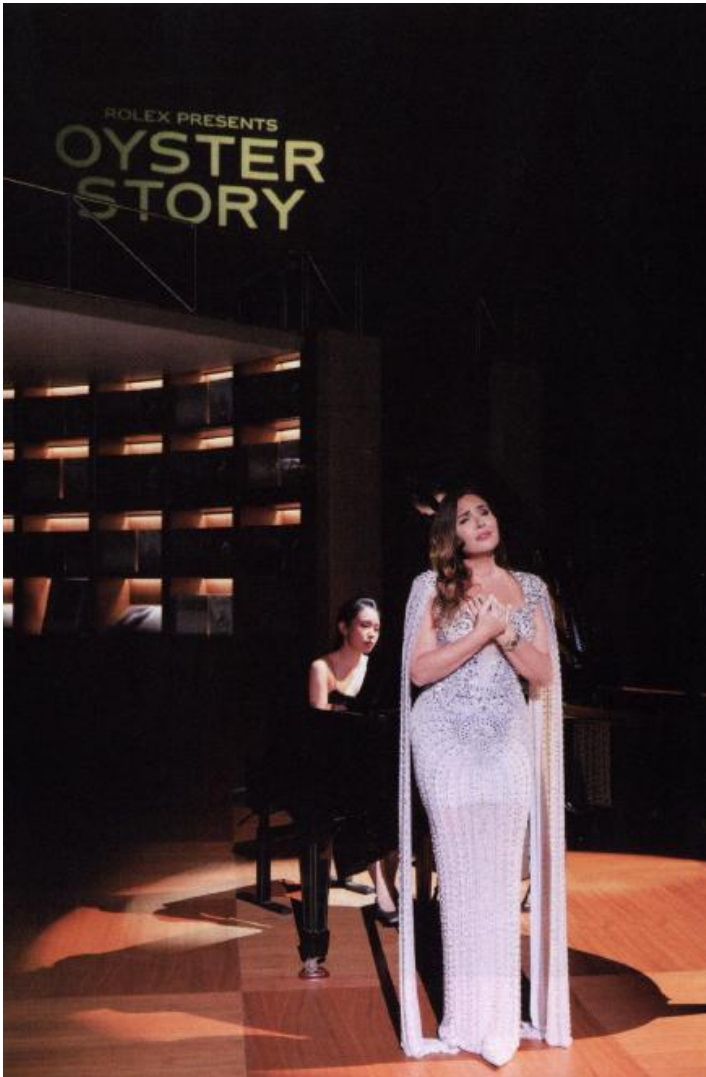
I am also working to bring opera into contemporary art. Opera is a very pure classic; the stories that have survived for centuries encompass every aspect of human life—love and hate, joy and sorrow, even the passage of time. These subjects can resonate in any era. I want to promote opera in ways young people find more approachable, and immersive experiences are now a major trend.

I am currently developing an “immersive opera experience” project and have found partners for it. In addition to inviting leading orchestras and singers, we will use light, imagery and sound to create entirely new opera settings. I hope even young people who have never set foot in an opera house will be willing to come in and try it.

Q: Rolex has long supported young arts professionals. As a brand ambassador, how do you view this support for emerging talent?

A: Rolex’s contribution to the arts is irreplaceable. The company understands that classical art is not merely entertainment; it is a cultural heritage that all humanity must protect from generation to generation. Supporting young artists means protecting this precious legacy, while also helping young people grow.

From the arts and film to scientific research, Rolex has consistently paved the way for new generations. Its long-term outlook and support for the future are something I deeply admire.



Q: The Oyster watch has now existed for a century, while opera has an even longer tradition. Do you see common ground between watchmaking and your performance?

A: The Oyster watch is one hundred years old, while opera as an art form has endured for five hundred years. Last night, I felt that I was witnessing the birth of an art form—or rather, that I had become part of it. These two worlds are perfectly suited to each other.

Watchmaking is an ancient craft, yet every year's new releases show updates that respond closely to contemporary needs. It is the same for me: no performance is ever unchanged. Every night I perform, I have to read the emotions on the faces of the audience in front of me and react instantly, striving to create the best possible result. It is a very subtle psychological game—and that is where its beauty lies.

Q: Looking to the future, what lasting impact do you think Rolex's efforts today will have?

A: When I saw that Oyster watch yesterday, I could clearly feel that Rolex had already established itself as an industry benchmark

a century ago. A hundred years involve the legacy of several generations. It is not only about watches, but also about performers' passion and trust.

I believe the brand will carry that commitment forward into the next century and the one after that, allowing every generation to find resonance in it. Last night, I could not help wondering how Mr Hans Wilsdorf would feel if he were there. Since the Oyster watch was born, it has continued to evolve with the needs of each era, yet throughout that century of evolution, it has never strayed from his original intention.