

1962

A harman/kardon valve AM/FM tuner built in 1952.

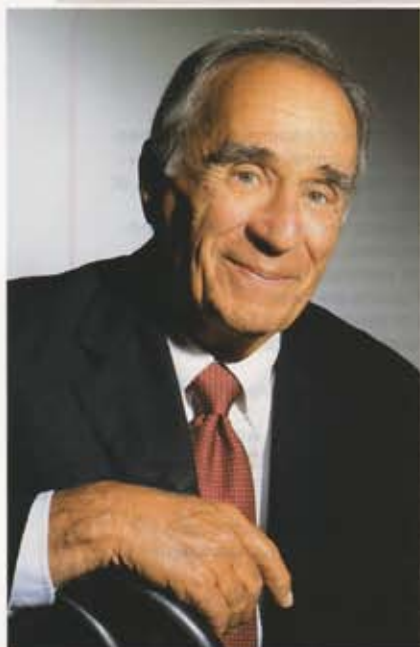
harman/kardon's famous Citation B solid-state power amplifier, designed in 1962.

1952



An Interview with Dr Sidney Harman

As Executive Chairman of Harman International, managing such world-famous brands as harman/kardon, JBL, AKG, AudioAccess, Infinity, Lexicon, Revel, Mark Levinson, Soundcraft and Studer, **Dr Sidney Harman** is one of the most powerful men in the audio business. Harman, who celebrated his 90th birthday earlier this year, says he's looking for a successor because he plans to retire 'within the next 25 years'. **Ryszard Balys** recorded the following interview...



RB: You were already in your thirties when you founded Harman Kardon with your partner Bernard Kardon. What was your first job?

SH: Before Harman Kardon was formed in 1953, Bernard Kardon and I were employed at the David Bogen Company. It was a small, privately-owned manufacturer of public address equipment. He was its Chief Engineer and I was its General Manager... although I had originally worked for him in the Engineering Department.

RB: How did that lead you to found Harman Kardon?

SH: We were both very interested in music and devoted our spare time to developing a superior music reproducing system by modifying and improving the performance of the public address amplifiers produced at the Bogen Company. We then borrowed professional turntables from a local radio station and developed our own elaborate loudspeaker system to complete the high-fidelity system. [Our] friends and family were enormously impressed but Mr Bogen was not. We, therefore, decided to proceed on our own and began Harman Kardon with a total of \$20,000. The company started in downtown New York City in 1953.

RB: Was choosing the audio industry an impulse? Did intuition or observation of the market play a part?

SH: I did not so much choose the audio industry as it, in effect, chose me. I mean to say that it did not exist until, coincidentally, Bernard Kardon and I joined a handful of other pioneers who loved the products we were making and imagined we might manage to make a modest living through manufacturing and selling them.

RB: Today your company Harman International is one of the 'founding fathers' of the audio industry; its annual turnover exceeds US\$3 billion and it employs almost 10,000 people. Such development of a company managed by one man is a marvel. It's said that one can be lucky in business but that real success is reserved for gifted or visionary people. Which group do you think you belong to?

SH: You say that one can be lucky in business but that real success is for gifted or visionary people. I agree with you but I do add another component. That is hard work. The odds are essentially poor for anyone beginning a totally new business. The odds improve if you can create an amalgam of vision, hard work and attention to detail. That is not often found but, when it is, the odds for success improve. That is probably the most one can hope for.

1983

The Citation fourteen FM tuner/amplifier—the first to incorporate Dolby noise reduction.



Dolby HXPRO made its debut on the harman/kardon cd49i three-head cassette deck, released in 1983.



RB: When was Harman International Industries, Inc. founded? Do you remember when the company first took over the brands that are now part of the company? What brand was it? What about JBL?

SH: After Bernard [Kardon] retired in 1957, I continued harman/kardon as a brand name but changed the corporate name to Harman International Industries, Inc. Our first acquisition was JBL in 1969. As you know, it continues today as a very important part of our company.

RB: You've stated that your philosophy is that interpersonal relations form the basis of a company's operations. This philosophy is widely emphasised; does this mean you believe it is a rarity in business?

SH: I continue the belief that, if the leadership of the business honours the people who do the actual work, the likelihood of business success increases and the lives of all of the people, including the management, are enhanced. That point of view is frequently expressed by corporations in their public statements and in their annual reports. It is frequently very difficult to separate those who are genuinely committed to the philosophy from those who recognise it as appealing to the students of industry and sociology. I believe in it absolutely but by no means do I argue that I have been completely successful. It is simply not enough for the head of the corporation to be committed. He must develop senior managers who share his convictions and are equally determined to implement them. That is not easy work.

RB: Throughout your life you have been widely active outside business: you have been a member of school boards and associations and you have also set up some of them. You managed Friends World College, you are the founder of Program on Technology, Public Policy and Human Development at the John F. Kennedy

School of Government, Harvard University, you are running Program Committee of the Board at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. These are just a few examples of your continued activity in public and private education. How are you able to find the time and energy to do all this while running a major company at the same time? Can you explain your desire to continually engage in educational projects?

SH: You ask where the instinct for education arises and how I find the time. Once you begin to exercise the instinct, it becomes so natural that you tend to accept it as fundamental and inescapable. I was aware of an enormous curiosity—about everything—as a young man. And I remember that I was a prodigious reader of nearly everything. As I read, my curiosity expanded and my excitement about good writing also grew. Through it, I was compelled to determine what values and activities in life were most attractive and most rewarding to a curious mind. Learning and an interest in epistemology followed. When one develops respect and affection for determining and organising one's beliefs and convictions, it is difficult not to also organise one's life.

RB: In your publications you dedicate a lot of attention to the relationship between people and their work. The success of the program Quality of Working Life—a program I believe you personally developed and implemented in your International subsidiaries—is an example of your abiding interest in this issue. What did you want to achieve? Were you successful? Do you see other organisations following your example?

SH: The tens of thousands of people who work for me have made me wealthy. I owe it to them and to their extended families to do what I can to make the world a healthier, safer and more rewarding place in which to live. I have learned many things while working.


RB: Do you think people who succeeded in business have an obligation to act as widely on social and cultural matters as you do?

SH: Of course. I believe that people who succeed in business should think and act vigorously in the social, cultural and political worlds. They owe it to society... and they owe it to themselves.

RB: What did you learn during your two-year stint as the Deputy Secretary of Commerce for the US Government?

SH: I learned, among other things, that the most unjustly criticised people in the country were—for the most part—those who worked for the government. They were so frequently very well-educated and very patriotic. They could often have earned much more money in the private sector, but wanted to work in government so that they could contribute to a better life for everybody. Sadly, however, they were enormously frustrated by the bureaucratic character of government. That awareness reinforced my convictions about how I should operate in the private world.

RB: You are also involved in music and the arts—I understand you serve as a trustee of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association and the National Symphony Orchestra—and have projects with The Shakespeare Theatre and the Harman Centre for the Arts. What is your goal in these latest ventures?

SH: I am very interested in the Harman Centre for the Arts because it will embrace an existing and artistically very successful theatre company, The Shakespeare Theatre, and because it will also encourage and support other performing arts organisations which can create the new works in the Arts—hopefully, a new Mozart or a new Shakespeare. 

Ryszard Balys