

Harman holds forth

Interview: Sidney Harman

As Dr Sidney Harman, 89, retires as Chairman of Harman International Industries after five decades in the industry, we discover how his life and audio philosophies have maintained his enthusiasm.

Q You were in your thirties when you founded Harman Kardon in New York 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.

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.

Friends and family were enormously impressed — but Mr. Bogen was not. So we 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.

Q: 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?

SH: After Bernard Kardon retired in 1957, I continued the Harman Kardon brand 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.

Q: You've stated that interpersonal relations form the basis of a company's operations. This philosophy is widely emphasised; do 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.

But it is 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 would I argue that I have been completely successful. It is 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.

Q: The success of the 'Quality of Working Life' program that 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?

BELOW: Harman Kardon's first product from 1953 — an FM tuner. The next year saw the first HK hi-fi receiver, with amplifier, preamplifier and tuner in one package. The first stereo receiver appeared in 1958.



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.

Q: Do you think people who have succeeded in business have an obligation to act widely on social and cultural matters? You have been widely active outside business — a member of school boards and associations, the founder of programs at Harvard University and the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies... How were you able to find the time?

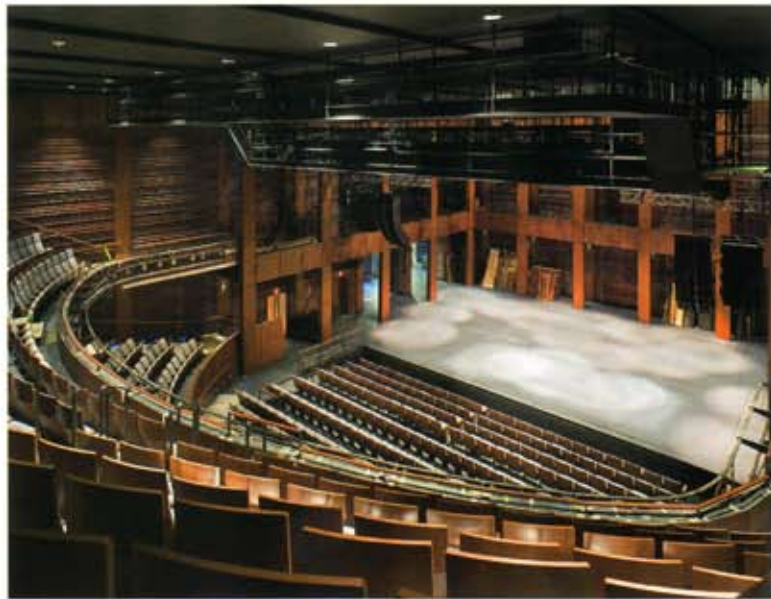
SH: Of course, I believe that people who succeed in business should think and act vigorously in the social, cultural and political worlds. They owe it to society — and they owe it to themselves.

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. As a young man I was aware of an enormous curiosity — about everything. 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 [the theory of knowledge] 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.

Q: What did you learn during your two-year stint as the Deputy Secretary of Commerce for the United States 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 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.

Q: Your 2003 book *Mind Your Own Business* is a little different to your other titles. Is it a kind of overview in which a mature man shares his knowledge about business and life with the reader? It emphasises your old-fashioned formula for running a straightforward, honest business with respect for those you deal with.



SH: *Mind Your Own Business* is, as you suggest, a set of reflections about a lengthy and vigorously-lived life. I enjoyed writing it, and it confirmed my conviction that writing is, itself, inadequately appreciated, especially in the business community. Writing is not the mere transfer of intellectual inventory from the mind to the paper. At its best, it is an act of discovery. People who write seriously often read what they have written and exclaim, "I did not know I knew that."

Q: You are also involved in music and the arts — tell us more about The Shakespeare Theatre and the Harman Center for the Arts. What is your goal for this, your latest venture?

SH: I am very interested in the Harman Center 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, the new Mozart or the new Shakespeare.

Q: Harman International's annual turnover today exceeds US\$3bn and employs almost 10,000 people. One can be lucky in business but real success is 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.

[Original interview: Ryszard Balys]

ABOVE: Sidney Harman Hall, the new theatre in Washington DC for The Shakespeare Theatre Company. (Image: Diamond and Schmitt Architects)