

FT HAS COPYRIGHT 2012

May 17, 2012

Accountant found all the world's a stage

By Dina Medland

With a violinist father and a renowned conductor as a brother, it was perhaps inevitable that Zarin Mehta's career would take a musical turn.

It was equally likely that his career would have an international flavour, his family having mostly left India for destinations around the world.

Mr Mehta himself, born in Mumbai, is now a US citizen and lives in New York, which he reached via London and Montreal – and via the accountancy profession.

He has been executive director of the New York Philharmonic orchestra for more than a decade and its president since 2004, in recognition of his outstanding leadership of the orchestra.

He has also been recognised by the accountancy profession and recently became only the second international recipient in more than two decades of an “outstanding achievement award” from the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales.

Ironically, it was his decision to leave the UK in the late 1950s and early 1960s that enabled him to put his accountancy qualification, gained in London, to full use.

Living in London in the 1950s was not easy for a new arrival from India: “My first problem was in understanding the people around me – it takes the ear a little while. But I was thrilled to be here, and I took full advantage of London.

“I was essentially an apprentice working at articles, and was also doing correspondence courses at night to study. I had a lot of young friends from all over the world. I stayed with a family at first for six months, and then moved into a hostel. It took six years in total for me to qualify, and I lived all over London.”

But during that time he came to realise that “as an Indian I could not have made it into a partnership in a major firm in London and I needed to go somewhere else”.

He says he never had a career plan: “But I do look forward and I was always good at numbers. I remember the moment when doing accountancy abroad was first suggested to me. We were in a movie house in Mumbai right after my ‘Senior Cambridge’ [school-leavers’ exams] in India and an uncle who was a chartered accountant suggested I go to England and train.

“From that time on I thought ‘yes, I’m going to be an accountant and it is going to be in London’.”

The most difficult part was securing a placement from such a distance. But help appeared in the form of a woman responsible for a scholar scheme run by India’s Tata Group in the UK who had contacts with businesses in which she had previously placed young Indians. She opened doors and in 1955 Zarin Mehta joined a small accountancy firm in the East End of London.

After qualifying, he was interviewed for a post with the World Bank in Washington but did not enjoy the process. His older brother Zubin had just been named music director of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra in Canada, and so Mr Mehta applied to Coopers & Lybrand in Montreal, which he joined in 1963. In 1970 he became a partner.

Mr Mehta is modest on the subject of his family. His father, Mehli Mehta, was a violinist and founder of the Bombay Symphony Orchestra and is described on the New York Philharmonic’s website as “largely credited with introducing western classical music to India”.

music director from 1978 to 1991. His mother played the piano and was “knee deep in music”, which meant Mr Mehta grew up with “a deep appreciation of music”, and in the mid-1960s he married the Canadian soprano, Carmen Lasky, after her divorce from his brother, Zubin. The couple have a son and a daughter.

That musical background led him in 1981 to take a three-year leave of absence from Coopers & Lybrand to manage the Montreal Symphony Orchestra; he had already been helping to run it “behind the scenes” for some time.

Mr Mehta recalls: “I said ‘I am taking the leave for pseudo-professional reasons. But I will be involved with all the leaders of the community, and it can only be good for the firm. And they all agreed.’”

He adds: “To my colleagues on the orchestra’s board I said ‘I will run the orchestra but I am hopeless at fundraising, and I don’t want to do it. Then in the first week I raised \$100,000 from two sources and I said ‘hey I’m good at this!’ I had no idea that it’s easier when you’re in it and ask for money than when you are outside asking somebody else.”

His secondment led to him being made managing director of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra in 1981, where he stayed until 1990, when he became president and chief executive of the Ravinia Festival, a multi-disciplinary US summer music festival at which the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has performed annually since 1936.

In 10 years with the Ravinia Festival, he launched several innovative programmes, including an educational outreach series that helped to take music into schools that could no longer afford to build the arts into their curriculum.

“Accountancy prepares one to be able to run very different kinds of businesses, and my background prepared me for the music,” he says.

Since 2000 he has been running the New York Philharmonic – which is much like managing any organisation. He has taken it on tours abroad, organised and run festivals, placed it on a more commercial footing and brought in familiar names, such as Luciano Pavarotti, the late tenor, and car-maker Volkswagen, for artistic collaborations and sponsorship.

He leaves the orchestra at the end of this season and is looking forward to moving to Chicago, where he hopes to cook some Indian food: “I’ve never thought of myself as an Indian per se, I think of myself as a person,” he says – before confessing to a love of the country’s food.

SECRET CV

Who were your mentors?

My paternal grandfather Rustom Mehta had a huge influence on me because of his ethics and his values. I wouldn’t call him a mentor, but I also greatly admired the Mayor of Montreal, Jean Drapeau, with whom I worked closely in the 1980s – and the way he handled Charles De Gaulle when he visited in 1967.

What was your first big break?

My realisation in the 1960s that in order to evolve my career I would have to leave Britain, and my subsequent move to Canada.

What else might you have done?

Cook! I would still like to own and run a restaurant serving Indian food with a good dollop of Parsi cooking – which you can’t seem to get anywhere.

Best career advice to others

Only look for solutions. Too many people dwell on the past: the thing is to get on with life. I think I have passed that on to my children.