



MEHER PUDUMJEE

PITCHING IT RIGHT

Where's the time to be second soprano in a professional choir as well as be a manager, wife and mother? Meher Pudumjee, chairperson of Thermax, would say that it is all about being organized and knowing how to improvise

Name: Meher Pudumjee
Title: Chairperson, Thermax Ltd
Age: 41 years
Educative: Master's in chemical engineering, Imperial College of Science & Technology, London
Pursuits: Western classical music, choral singing, piano playing
Claim to fame: Introduced successful succession planning at the top at Thermax, India's leading energy and environment solutions provider
FE Women in Business Young Achiever Award in 2006
Represented India at the Asian Business Women's Conference in Osaka

Six days a week, an indispensable PDA and some improvisation help Meher Pudumjee juggle her roles as professional manager, wife and mother. Chairperson since 2004 of the Rs2,210 crore, Pune-based Thermax, one of India's leading companies in energy and environment management, a typical Monday begins with a review of operations with her managing director, M.S. Unnikrishnan.

Mid-week, she focuses on the big picture, exploring business opportunities. Later in the week, she's in Osaka, addressing fellow Asian women entrepreneurs; then back home, as part of Thermax's corporate social responsibilities programme, she introduces villagers on the outskirts of Pune to rainwater harvesting. Weekends, she's at basketball practice with son Zahaan, taking daughter Lea to cookery class in between catching a concert with husband Pheroz.

But Tuesdays are different. On that day, come what may, Pudumjee leaves work well on time to arrive at the Gulati Hall at 6.30pm sharp, occasionally straight from the airport after a business trip. Putting her multiple avatars on hold, she becomes a voice singing second soprano, blending harmoniously with 14 others who constitute the Chamber Singers choir. Under the watchful baton of their conductor Veronica Krishnaya, this small dedicated band of women has strived for more than a decade to excel in singing the works of Bach, Brahms, Schubert, Debussy and Bernstein. It holds two public performances a year, at Easter and before Christ-

mas, in locations such as Pune, Goa and Mumbai. Pudumjee explains, "We are a group united by a common passion—the love of singing. It's my getaway to a different place. It's something I do for myself, not for anybody else." Pudumjee's love for Western classical music came from her entrepreneur father, the late Rohinton Aga, the visionary co-founder of Thermax. Her mother Anu, who retired as chairperson of the company in 2004 and now works full-time for non-profit causes (see *Personal Space*, 11 May 2007), is from a family that enjoyed Hindustani classical music—her father played the *dhruba* (an Indian string instrument). As a child, Pudumjee was surrounded by music—her parents often hosted visiting musicians and she would fall asleep to the strains of Bach and Beethoven from her father's gramophone. Aga could also whistle along with the composition in perfect pitch. Years later, in 1982, after a stroke, he taught himself how to read and count again, going on to write his business memoir, *Changing the Mindset*. "But the one thing that never came back was his flute-like whistle," says Pu-

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SANGHITA ADVANI

dumjee, wistfully. Krishnaya came into Pudumjee's life when she was seven, as her piano teacher. "Meher had the talent to become a concert pianist," says Krishnaya, "but she simply did not have the desire." As Pudumjee says, "I hated being showed off in front of an audience." She loved Krishnaya's group concerts, where students would play various instruments as an ensemble.

While doing her A levels in school in England, Pudumjee got to perform Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Her father, "an absolute perfectionist", came to visit, renting a small recording room with a piano, where he made her repeatedly practice and play back the piece. Then, just before the concert, while complimenting her on her hard work, he said, "Now just play to express rather than to impress." These were the values on which he built Thermax. Later, studying to be a chemical engineer at Imperial College, London, Pudumjee applied this dictum to her musical choice. She joined the college choir, fell in love with choral singing and never played the piano in public again.

It's the diversity of the Chamber Singers that makes the choir such a satisfying experience for Pudumjee. At 83, its senior-most member, Gladys Kothavala, can no longer see but still sings beautifully. Page Mehta, 81, says she loves both the singing and the camaraderie. Zinnia Sartha, a human resources professional and, at 77, the group's youngest addition, says, "When we meet, it's

like we've known each other for years." Neeta Ranagawansi is a German language teacher-turned-technical editor; Lorraine David an industrial psychologist who has joined her husband's training business. Krishnaya's other students are as varied—she conducts a Pocket Choir of youngsters between 15 and 18, who perform alongside street children living in Shivaji Nagar railway station. And to make the music meaningful to them, she unabashedly draws upon Bollywood repertoire.

Pudumjee doesn't play solo, and under her baton, Thermax's growth path is lateral and inclusive. Along with other Pune-based companies, Thermax partners Dr Reddy's innovative Livelihood Advancement Business School, teaching life skills to underprivileged youth, with all its participants successfully clinching jobs in the hospitality, retail and IT-enabled sectors. Anuradha Prasad, a managing trustee, Dr Reddy's Foundation, says, "Meher's involvement is never cosmetic. To tally hands-on, she knows every student by name, regularly visiting the centre and closely monitoring their progress."

In the business world, Pudumjee is rated a good listener. Naushad Forbes, director, Forbes Marshall, a competitor of Thermax in steam engineering and a personal friend, says, "Meher never tells people what to do; but always asks." Deep Anand, chairman, Degremont, a competitor of Thermax in the waste management space, admits that he has appointed Pudumjee on his board because "as a young corporate leader, I see her as a great role model for my daughter who will take over the business.

Meher will never take the soft option." And Gautam Thapar, chairman, Crompton Greaves, says he values Pudumjee as an independent director on his board because "she doesn't shy away from asking questions directly until satisfied and often looks at the softer aspects of what we do."

These days, as oil prices hover around the \$100 a barrel mark and alternate energy sources become crucial, companies such as Thermax offer solutions to environmental problems that will get heard louder. Fittingly, in a recent article in Thermax's in-house journal, *Fireside*, Pudumjee reveals that her vision for Thermax is that of an orchestra, where "you are as good as your weakest link and where every voice or instrument has to play its part perfectly, through a spirit of teamwork and seamlessness."

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