

REAL ESTATE PEOPLE

ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

Former opera singer finds that real estate is his specialty aria

By JASON TURCOTTE

Former opera performer Ari Harkov is singing a new tune. After his voice opened the world up to him, he's now commanding the real estate stage as a vice president at Halstead Property.

Before joining the brokerage business, Harkov spent his life in the spotlight, gracing stages throughout the US and Europe. From the time he began singing classically in high school, he never dreamed of doing anything else.

Growing up in Northern New Jersey, Harkov's talent began to bud after joining his high school men's choir. From there, he began performing at regional, state

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and then national levels. While he wanted to forego a traditional four-year college education, his parents cautioned putting all his eggs in one basket.

"I really wanted to go to a conservancy, but my parents thought a real degree from a real college would be better," Harkov said. "And they were right."

Harkov attended Vassar College, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in art history. During one of those years, he spent time living in Italy, where he studied art history and voice, while becoming fluent in Italian.

Graduating from Vassar with honors — and at the top of his class — he received the prestigious Maguire Fellowship. He applied to various music programs and participated in numerous apprenticeships with opera companies around the country.

But his first professional gig took him across the Atlantic. Just out of college, Harkov performed with a professional choral company based in London. He also found work singing in France and Italy.

"I loved being my own boss, being out and about traveling and seeing the world a little bit," Harkov said.

But he learned quickly that living out of a suitcase was not the glamorous life he had envisioned with a music career. The inability to plant roots somewhere, or raise a family, took its toll, and his wife, Maggie —

whom he met at a Malibu, Calif. gig in 2004 — sensed he needed a change.

"She knew before I did that it wasn't the career for me," Harkov said.

So Harkov performed his final professional gig in 2006 and did some temping immediately following his departure from opera. Toying with the notion of a real estate career, his wife encouraged Harkov to obtain his license, and after doing so he took a rental agent position with the small, family-owned HH Realty Group.

While he learned a lot at HH, Harkov spent just six months there because of a desire to transition into the sales market. To do so successfully, he felt he needed the support of a larger firm and, ultimately, he made the move to Halstead in early 2007.

"So, basically I've been riding this whole thing down," Harkov said of his timing into the residential sales market. "I unfortunately didn't get to experience that much of the heyday of the market because I was just getting my feet wet."

Therefore, Harkov had to learn real estate sales the hard way, through cold calling and persistence. But after following up on for-sale-by-owner ads, Harkov landed his first listing old-school style and ended up selling the property for his client within a week.

The down market has certainly proved more fascinating for Harkov, albeit more frustrating as well. But his determination paid off after his Halstead manager nominated him for REBNY's coveted Rookie of the Year Award — an award that gave him tremendous satisfaction for sustaining his new career in such challenging economic times.

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had been dealt...I guess I've always felt I had been swimming upstream," Harkov said.

The self-discipline he learned while touring the opera world is one reason he believes he's held up strong in today's market. Coming from a background where he had to self-manage his singing career has helped Harkov adapt to real estate, he said, citing the independent nature of the brokerage business.

But with that also came added responsibilities and challenges.

"I'm not the type of person who can be tied down to a desk all day. In that sense, it really fits my personality," Harkov said. "But there's also a downside to it, too. There are no paychecks, there are no benefits, there are no paid vacations, and my BlackBerry's going off seven days a week!"

Harkov, who continues to expand upon his industry knowledge through residential and commercial real estate finance courses at New York University, says the bulk of his business today stems from first-time buyers, though he's starting to see evidence of

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higher-end activity return to the market once again.

"It takes a lot of work. There's a lot of hand-holding with first-time buyers," he said.

Harkov is also an active investor. While he no longer sings, he still enjoys the arts but spends most of his free time playing soccer in a year-round league at Chelsea Piers. He currently resides in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.