

## Singer raises opera bar

### Richard Margison's Highlands Opera Studio offers help to rising stars

By Amy Smart, Times Colonist

He has performed as Calaf at the Canadian Opera Company and as Florestan at the Metropolitan Opera. And for the past five years, Victoria-born tenor Richard Margison has been playing the new role of mentor.

Margison and his wife, director and violist Valerie Kuinka, opened the Ontariobased Highlands Opera Studio in 2007 with the intention of giving budding opera singers a leg up in the industry.

"It's a labour of love for us," the internationally acclaimed tenor said this week. "It's to facilitate that bridge between, say, an apprenticeship or institution and the actual world of opera."

Margison began his career performing rock in the bars and coffeehouses of Victoria - his affinity for non-classical music made him the subject of a Bravo! documentary called Folk-Singing Opera Star. He made his Pacific Opera Victoria debut in 1980 and since moving away in 1988, Margison has sung in opera houses around the world, from La Scala in Milan, Italy, to the San Francisco Opera.

His last show in Victoria was in November, when he performed Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* with mezzo-soprano Susan Platts and the Victoria Symphony.

The 58-year-old, an Officer of the Order of Canada, now lives in Toronto and has a cottage in Haliburton, Ont., site of the couple's Highlands Opera Studio.

Auditions for the advanced professional training program take place at the University of Victoria on Jan. 22. Interested participants must schedule auditions online at [highlandsoperastudio.com](http://highlandsoperastudio.com). Margison and Kuinka select about 15 participants for the program each year through nationwide auditions. While the first year saw between 50 and 55 hopefuls vying for a spot, that number grew to 204 by last year, Margison said.

Now entering its sixth season, the three-week summer program includes vocal master classes, individual voice lessons and movement classes. Past faculty members have included John Fanning, Timothy Noble and Christianne Riel - as well as Pacific Opera Victoria's artistic director, Timothy Vernon.

Vernon, who knew Margison as a teenager, conducted and coached participants on audition strategies and more, last summer. He said that while there are several programs for emerging opera professionals across Canada, Highlands Opera Studio distinguishes itself by hosting both senior voice teachers and major agents - not just to hear the kids, but to counsel them.

"That certainly is a contribution that this program makes, which I don't think is available anywhere else," he said.

Margison said that last year, agents signed four of the 15 singers. Past participants have gone on to the Metropolitan Opera, the Glyndebourne Festival Opera in Germany and Opéra Bastille in France, he said.

Positions in the program are fully subsidized. Aside from student loans and other burdens on opera hopefuls, Margison said the shrinking industry provides enough of an obstacle.

"I've said several times in the past few months, I'm glad I'm not starting out now," he said. "There's more pressure on the opera companies and symphonies, and sadly, many of them are having to close their doors," he said. Margison and Kuinka fund the program through concerts and events, as well as support from banks and private donors.

In his own career, Margison said he benefited from a similar program - Canada Opera Piccola, created by Victoria's Pierrette Alarie and Leopold Simoneau. While the program grows, Margison and Kuinka are also advocating for the creation of a "green" opera house in Haliburton that would run on geothermal, wind and solar power.

The project is in its early stages and the duo are working on a feasibility report. In the meantime, Margison said the couple's mandate is clear.

"Both Valerie and I have a fierce commitment to promoting and supporting this huge pool of Canadian talent," the tenor said. "And not necessarily have [performers] go away and then be recognized. . We'd like to be able to create that image on their own soil."



International opera star Richard Margison is coming home to Victoria to mentor new talent.  
Photograph by: Katie Cross, .