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## Up Close: Diverging Pathways

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## UP CLOSE

### Diverging Pathways

Bishop's career has moved from opera to teaching and back again.

#### **E**lizabeth Bishop '89 is nothing if not practical.

When her opera career stalled, she skipped the obvious opportunity for drama and evaluated her options. The break from her own work provided the space she needed to create the Potomac Vocal Institute, a nonprofit that will celebrate its two-year anniversary in May.

It's a classic example of how Bishop handles challenges.

Her father, John Bishop, graduated from Furman in 1967 and it was the only place she wanted to study music. But money was tight and Bishop knew it wasn't going to happen unless she "had skin in the game."

She cobbled together multiple scholarships in music and academics, and a random check from Wal-Mart that she earned for writing a short

essay. She worked three jobs. When you put every piece together yourself, "you begin to understand the worth of things," Bishop said.

She started as a music major but "followed a boy" into political science.

"The boy got away but the poli sci stuck," she said, laughing.

It's the degree she ultimately earned, along with her degree in music—and the kind of education that builds a better musician, Bishop said. Young artists excel when they don't pigeonhole themselves early.

"What makes you musical is who you are," she said. "You need to know a lot . . . Otherwise, you're just a technician, and nobody cares."

With her voice not yet mature, she focused on violin. But at some point, the practical side kicked in again and she ac-

knowledged she wasn't willing to practice enough to make a living as a violinist. She played first violin in a Furman performance of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 1 and decided it was the perfect high point. She hung up her violin and turned her attention to her voice.

In 1989, Bishop left Greenville, her hometown, for New York City's subways, a tiny apartment and Juilliard School. Her Furman education had been so thorough that during placement exams, she tested out of all but the last semester of graduate music theory and most of Juilliard's music history classes; she knew the material already.

"I was very, very lucky," she said. "I had no frame of reference up until then on how well I had been prepared."

Her first professional job was for New York's Metropolitan Opera, in a role so small, Bishop couldn't find it in the score without help.

She went on to perform across the country for years, from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, and numerous cities in between. Like most full-time American opera singers, she was a contract employee, taking jobs for weeks at a time with one company after another.

And then she had a chance to be practical again.

"I was given the gift of unemployment for about nine months one year," Bishop said.

It wasn't shocking. Older voices cycle out and new ones rise to leading roles. But the lack of work came sooner than she had expected.

Still, she'd learned long ago the lesson she passes on to young musicians now: "There

was more than just one place for me."

Her time at Furman, studying across disciplines, contributed to that perspective.

"When you're aware of a bigger world, it makes a bigger world less scary," Bishop said. "I believe in educating yourself outside the bounds of just your narrow world."

The professional lull gave Bishop time to turn her attention to her handful of private students. Many showed great promise but hadn't made the cut for elite programs where they could train further and launch professional careers.

Bishop created the Potomac Vocal Institute in May 2015 to offer a la carte workshops so these students and others like them would have a way to stay sharp and ready.

"Otherwise, they simply stall out at the last place somebody said, 'No,'" Bishop said.

Her passion for the work surprises even her. In its first six months, nearly 300 students attended classes at the institute.

"I would have never thought that I'd be OK if I stopped singing," Bishop said.

Meanwhile, the job offers started coming again. These days, she's balancing singing, the institute and time with her husband, pianist and conductor Ken Weiss, and their 14-year-old daughter, Katherine, at their Virginia home.

"It's a good problem," she said.

When the balance shifts again, somewhere down the road, you won't find her fretting. It's the old lemons-into-lemonade adage.

"You might find you like lemonade better," Bishop said. ●

— by Kelley Bruss

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