

- On a High Note

Vanessa Eveleth ('23) – *What do you want to be when you grow up?* It's a question most have heard and answered as a child. **Eric Taylor ('18)**, a [vocal performance](#) alum from Westminster College, wanted to be a dentist but, by the end of his first year at college, a chance encounter with a Broadway performer inspired him to switch gears and go a different route. Taking that leap needed not just a revelation but a strong support system, too.

Playing Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* during high school was the first hint of Eric's promising future as an opera singer. As fortune would have it, [Lisa Hopkins Seegmiller](#), a Tony Award-winning classical singer and actress, was in the audience of the St. George's high school musical. But singing was not Eric's initial career plan.

Before arriving at Westminster, Eric enrolled at Utah State University and then transferred to Dixie State University to pursue dentistry. In the summer between his first and sophomore year of college, Lisa Hopkins Seegmiller reached out to Eric and asked him if he still sang. She encouraged him to look into singing, specifically opera. "Lisa reached out to me simply to encourage a talent that she heard in me. She had only heard me one time but knew there was something special in the performance that she saw."

With nothing planned for that summer and the strong suggestion from Lisa, Eric sang in his first opera at the [Utah Vocal Arts Academy](#)'s summer festival in Provo. While at the summer vocal performance program, former Westminster faculty Dr. Isaac Hurtado and Michael Chipman recruited Eric to Westminster College. The summer of 2015 was the beginning of Eric's life in opera.

"I didn't see my first opera until the summer after I sang in my first opera," Eric says. "It was *La Bohème* at [Utah Festival Opera](#) in Logan, UT. I had never listened to or known anything about opera but growing up I had a keen ear for classical music and would sometimes turn it on the radio in our family minivan. The passion for opera grew as I began to study it."

The faculty at Westminster played an influential role in Eric both becoming a part of the opera community and learning about vocal performance. "My vocal coach Emily Williams was always pushing me to do my best, apply for the next opportunity, and keep going," he explains.

Opera requires lots of experience and training, but it's quite costly to find the experience necessary to make a career out of it. While at Westminster, Eric was fortunate to have the support and resources he needed to gain a foothold in the selective opera world. The music program's director and now faculty emeritus, Dr. Christopher Quinn, supported Eric immensely. Eric's conversations with Dr. Quinn weren't focused on his career, but on how to stay motivated in the world of music. "He definitely made sure to talk about instilling passion into music," Eric says. "Opera is absolutely an art form that you get more from as you give more to it."

While not performing for the Westminster music program, Eric worked with the [Utah Symphony](#), as well as [Ballet West](#) in Salt Lake City. He also underwent a studio program with [Central City Opera](#), located in Central City, Colorado.

To top all his experiences as an undergraduate, Eric became a semifinalist at age 22 in the [National Council Audition](#) held at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) in 2017. "I went into the audition as somebody that didn't know anything about opera," Eric recalls, adding that he was the youngest person there to compete.

Eric's success at the Metropolitan Opera helped seal the deal for his future as a professional vocal performer. "I began to gain some notoriety with my name and international recognition," Eric says. "With my success, I saw the faith others in the profession had in me that I had something special to share. That made the decision to leave the so-called security of the medical field behind less scary."

Adding to Eric's repertoire, in 2020, he placed second in Houston Grand Opera's 33rd Annual [Concert of Arias](#) competition, which came with a prize reward of \$5,000.

Fast-forward to present day and Eric has a master's degree of music from Shepherd School of Music, Rice University and is working in the [Houston Grand Opera](#)'s studio program. "A studio program is like a medical residency," Eric explains. "After med school, a doctor goes to a hospital to finish up the hands-on training part."

That's pretty much what I'm doing, but in the opera world. It's a nice buffer between school and full, professional work."

But, unlike the medical field, opera is private contract work after Eric's studio program. "People just hire me to sing for their company if they want me for a show," Eric explains. "That means very little security and support, and I certainly don't get a 401k and health insurance. But it does mean that I get to travel the world and sing for a living." Eric is not sure where he will go next, but he is considering singing opera in Germany for the first couple years of his career.

Taking a risk can turn out grand results. The key ingredient, though, is to have powerful support—something Westminster has a history of providing. "The big moral that I hope people can take out of my story is to not be afraid of asking your professors for more," Eric says. "There's a lot of 'no's' that come along the way, but the more you ask, the more people are going to help you."

