



HIGH NOTES

Rising lyric coloratura soprano Christina The attributes her achievements to her spirit and drive, she tells ZARA ZHUANG

FIVE MINUTES IN, it becomes clear this isn't going to be another regular interview.

"What about yourself, Zara? How did you get to be a journalist?"

"You like writing? Lovely, lovely."

"I can already tell you're very easy to talk to!"

Christina The is inquisitive like a youngster, chats like a newfound friend, and dishes out life advice like a sage elder ("If I may be brutally honest in advising the youth," she offers on career choices). The only clue to her day job is her bright laughter that comes in trills, which reverberate through the loft-like Astor Bar at The St Regis Singapore on a Friday mid-afternoon.

The is an opera singer, and a smashing one too. Soon to be the artist-in-residence at New Opera Singapore, the petite 36-year-old lyric coloratura soprano takes on the dual role of Amore, or Cupid, and Valletto, a valet of the Empress, in the company's production of Claudio Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* from 1643. It is staged at the Victoria Theatre on July 29 and 30.

"It's one of those stories derived from real life," explains The (pronounced "Tay" but spelled the Chinese-Indonesian way). "It'll be exciting to perform something less mainstream." Rather than a faithful Renaissance or Baroque staging,

this production is adapted for a modern setting. "Hopefully people can relate to it, because I think the theme of human nature from the beginning till now [remains] the same," The says. "It's about love, jealousy, [vengeance] — even in real life we're still the same."

Preparing for an opera takes serious work. The morning after *Poppea*'s two-night run, The zips back to Australia to begin rehearsals for 19th-century French comic opera *Manon*. Even the rehearsals leading up to *Poppea*'s opening night are no walk in the park: They are ramped up from once or twice a week to once a day, while The squeezes in time to care for her daughters, aged three and six, who travelled to Singapore with her from their home in Perth. The can barely take a breather; she apologises for pausing to touch up her lipstick while waiting for her glass of Sauvignon Blanc to be poured. "How to organise this and organise that? Aiyah, I just washed my hair!" she adds with a laugh.

The has been on a roll lately. Since debuting in Singapore Lyric Opera's *Die Zauberflöte* in 2010 (which she performed while six months pregnant), she's gone on to star in *Hamlet*, *L'Elisir D'Amore*, *Ariadne auf Naxos* by Richard Strauss, and more. Just this year alone, she has sung in *CabaRed*, the Aliwal Arts Centre's cabaret-themed concert, and the oratorio *Stabat Mater* at the Victoria Concert Hall. And when she is back home in Perth, this Royal Academy of Music alumna practises regularly under the tutelage of Polish mezzo-soprano Jolanta Nagajek.

"The craft is never finished," The says of her training regime. "People say, 'Wah, it's so easy, you just open your mouth and [music] comes out' — you don't know how many

thousands of hours have gone into it"

Midway through chatting about one of her best friends in Singapore, The shifts focus. "What about yourself, Zara? You studied here? Overseas?" The asks while nibbling on potato chips. *It's a long story*, I reply. "Mhmm, I got time."

I manage to steer the conversation back to The. She comes from a musically inclined extended family; among the 15 cousins on her mother's side there is an artist, a fashion designer, a ballet instructor and a piano teacher. "When we hold weddings, we don't need a choir — all the uncles and aunts and cousins just sing."

Although The is a professional singer now, her first stop in the world of arts was ballet, which she studied from four to 16 years old, when her family of four fled to Singapore following the race riots in Indonesia.

After she was placed in the now-defunct Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic secondary school, The discovered she could hit the high notes effortlessly while singing along to musicals from *The Phantom of the Opera* to *Miss Saigon*. While earning degrees in finance and economics in Australia, she took music and vocal classes on the sly. After two years at her father's packaging and manufacturing business, she announced her

decision to turn pro, and in 2006 set off to attend masterclasses in Italy, Switzerland, Germany and the UK.

"It's just a passion," The explains her motivation to pursue opera. "[The lyrics] are very romantic, and to me it's appealing to be able to deliver [the music]; it's perfection but not rigid."

"How do you say to someone, 'I'll never look at him the way I look at you'? It's very heartfelt."

We uncover other nuggets. Mozart and Puccini — but not Strauss — are her favourite opera composers. The particularly doesn't hold back from letting on that she was a heavy clubber while she traversed Europe. When she's not rehearsing, hip-hop, R&B, soul and trance are her tunes of choice.

As we wind things down, The slips back into her ingenuous questioning. "What's a working week like for you? Long hours? What's your typical weekend like? I should interview you next time," she finishes, between peals of laughter. ■

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CHRISTINA THE PERFORMS DURING CABARET IN JANUARY