

# Sample Spreads For Review

## **Praise for Misadventures of a Little Soprano**

Like most humorists, Christina The knows the value of setting up a story well so her punchline always hits its mark, sometimes with a one-two jab. And we laugh, because the vignettes are all too familiar, like a magnifying glass opening our eyes into ourselves.

**Felix Cheong**  
Poet and Author

Classy humour and wit at their best! Melodiously entertaining — her words spring from the pages as if we are there witnessing all these comic mishaps along with her. Every anecdote sardonically laced and loaded with a well-timed punchline. I look forward to more written gem from our very own “little soprano”.

**Maestro Jeremy Monteiro**  
Jazz Musician, Recipient of Singapore’s Cultural Medallion

Christina’s writing speaks to her unique power of observation and a quick-witted instinct that sew those details, large and small, into the fabric of these refreshingly life affirming stories. Most of all, she reminds us of what it is to be human: stories that are always poised between the sublime and ridiculous, filled with empathy and positivity when facing the most challenging or triumphant aspects of daily life!

**Gerald Chew**  
Actor, Writer and Director

Filled with punchy, pithy, and occasionally spicy prose, if you’ve read Christina’s previous book *Diary of a Former Covidiot*, you know you’re in for a treat! From chauffeurs, national servicemen to retired maestros, Christina paints a very funny, honest and searingly sincere look at the wonderful foibles that make us laugh, cry and ultimately feel human.

**Reuben Lai**  
Tenor and Co-Artistic Director of L’arietta Productions

Christina shows us characters caught up in charming episodes of hilarious misadventures and she does so in a most candid and warm way, with a keen eye for the irreverence of what this life brings.

**Li Lin Wee**  
Film Director, Bobbing Buoy Films

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A highly entertaining observation of the daily mundane with such wry witty writing! These little vignettes on our modern lives are so engrossing and relatable, it makes me wonder whether I have experienced something similar...a sense of déjà-vu especially in “Apri la bocca”. Written with such panache, this is a bestseller yet again!

**Jack Lin**

Violinist, Producer and Wine Enthusiast

Christina Thé (Tango-Hotel-Echo) shares her comedic wisdom and personal misadventures in an honest, witty and absurdly funny way. Each chapter misadventures is full of heart and soul. Looking forward to seeing *Misadventures of a Little Soprano* as a TV episodic!

**Ben Chan**

Executive Producer, Red Compass Media

OMG... I'm in fits of laughter after reading each vignette! From reliving experiences, refuelling the laughter and overcoming hardships, the messages behind these childhood vignettes opened my eyes to the meaningful moments in my own life.

**Carla Jane Heard**

Educator

Hilarious and culturally insightful!!! Christina's ability to find humor in every aspect of life is something we all should adopt, especially in times like these. I especially enjoyed the chapter about her Opera class – it reminded me of my art school days!

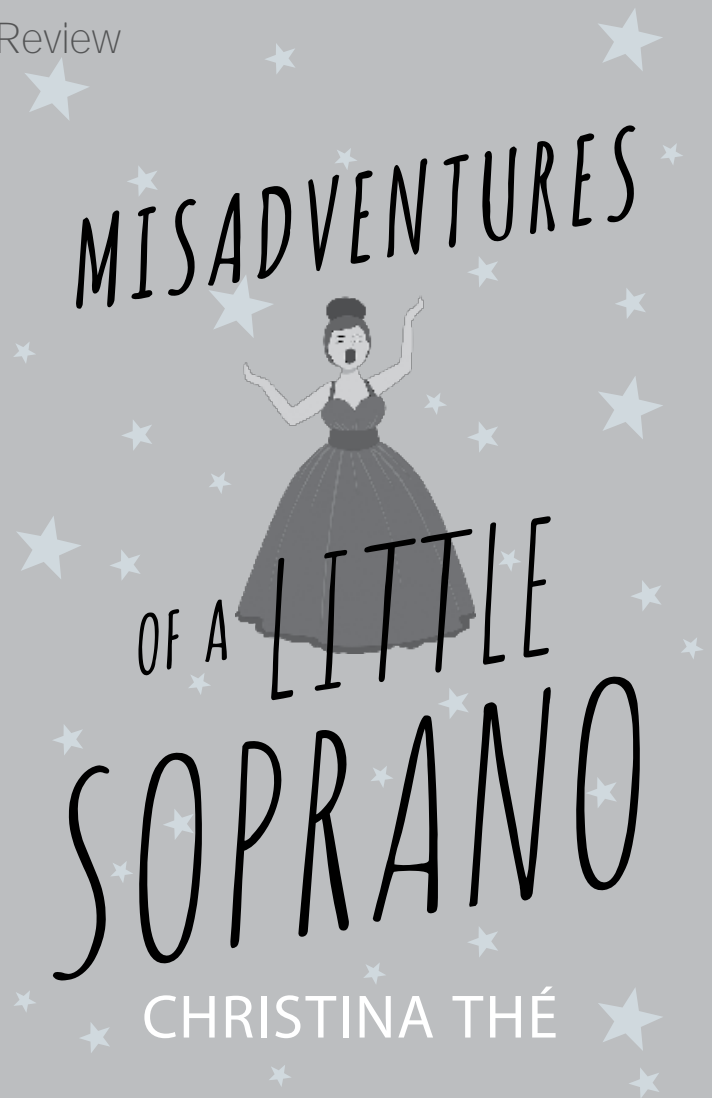
**Ayumi Matsuba**

International Artist

It reads like the collective memoirs of the cast of *The Voice* – if they were all raised in Southeast Asia. With the same jovial style and pace as *Diary of a Former Covidiot*, this spirited sequel returns with more relatable anecdotes leaving you cheering for Team Christina!

**D. Liang**

Investment Banker and Adventurer



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For Dad & Mum – for all the inspirations

and

For Zhuo Neng – to many more shared misadventures

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## FOREWORD

Welcome to the *Misadventures of a Little Soprano!*—Tales of things that did not go according to plan.

These 30 or so short stories were inspired by hilarious, incredible mishaps that I have witnessed along the road, from my childhood to the operatic realm and beyond. Each chapter with its own surprises.

May these tales bring a smile to your day, one story at a time. In the mornings, during your commute, before bedtime, or even during that precious time in the loo that we all treasure!

Even in the midst of catastrophe, keep seeing the funny side of things ☺ .

Shall we begin?

TO START WITH...



## Chapter 1

### “TOKYO–HONG KONG–ENGLAND”

Do you recall the time when we had to call the airline to make a flight booking? Some of us would, whereas some of us, being from a digital era generation, probably not. It was so during my dad’s time. He was a young entrepreneur and had to travel quite a lot overseas to make a living.

“T.H.E. My name *THE*.” (As he carefully spells out the letters.)

“Excuse me?”

Would be the usual exchange one would overhear between my dad and the airline phone operator. The to-be verb ‘*is*’ forever missing, as befitting a non-native English speaker from our side of the world. A compulsory labour for one who bears the surname, that should be pronounced the same way as one would for a Singaporean ‘Tay’. Thanks to the Dutch during their 350 years occupation of the Indonesian Archipelago, this phonetic spelling

followed European vowel sounds, which unfortunately in English, would be recognized as an article.

"My name is *THE*!"

My dad boomed (with a 'to-be' this time), convinced that this would aid comprehension for the airline operator. A common communication folly some of us might make: thinking that saying things much louder the second time around would aid in getting our message across to the party on the other end of the phone.

A week later the air ticket arrived in the mail. It read:

"Mr F. TOKYOHONGKONGENGLAND."

Hell hath no fury like one whose surname was so erroneously spelled.

Another customary phone call to the airline and one unhappy customer being courteously urged to use the internationally recognized phonetic alphabet when spelling his name the next time he made a booking: 'Tango-Hotel-Echo'. In his defence, there was a whole village of people bearing the common brunt of this perplexing surname in Surabaya, the capital of East Java. I presumed these must have been the same boat people who arrived four generations ago to that part of Malaya from old imperial China.

Twenty years later...

Typing on Facebook's sign-up page. First name, *Christina*; surname, *The*. Filled in more particulars, then pressed 'Enter'.

The response: "Please enter a real name."

Hmmmpfff. Must be some technological glitch. Let me try again. 'Enter' (again).

Another automated response: "Please do not use a fake name or nickname."

A third time around, something prompted me to use the accent on the letter *é*. A creative stroke of genius. Eh voila, problem solved. I officially existed on Facebook.

When told that a virtual machine had trolled our surname, my brother chuckled endlessly while my dad less so, as they too, were having difficulty registering on Facebook.

"Stupid internet," Dad remarked grumpily.

The bane of this peculiar surname did not quite stop there, as shortly after there was an occasion where I sang at a charity concert with proceeds going to Tsunami disaster victims. Lacking imagination, I decided to call the concert, "Christina The and Friends," modelling after "Pavarotti and Friends."

There was newspaper coverage of the concert, but it was suspiciously delayed and when I enquired as to the reason, the young Australian journalist explained as politely as he could

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that the word processor was having a problem coping with my surname: the spelling autocorrect kept correcting itself...

The article was eventually published with much hassle (on the journalist's part) and resignation (on my part). The headline read:

*“Christina, and The Friends,  
A Concert for Tsunami Victims.”*



## Chapter 2

**PANTO**

“Panto, go pick up Mr Peter Woon. The one you picked up before at the airport, ok. Boss said go now. You remember Mr Woon, right? Chinese Malaysian businessman?” The company secretary enquired of the driver.

“*Siap*, Ma’am,” saluting the secretary (*Siap* means ‘ready’ in Indonesian). “Yes. Ok. I will pick him up now. Errr, but just to be safe, may I carry a name noticeboard? So he can recognize me in the crowd,” Panto requested.

Panto did not speak English, so Ms Nani thought this was a reasonable suggestion and duly created a noticeboard with the guest's name on it and even larger lettering for the hotel name Mr Woon was booked to be staying in. The Borobudur Intercontinental Hotel in Central Jakarta was a five-star establishment and was the default hotel for all of my dad's overseas business visitors, owing to its convenient location from the head office.



My dad had a few drivers as I was growing up in Jakarta, some more memorable than others. Panto was definitely worth remembering, if not for the fact that he put up with my unbearably high-pitched tantrums in the car as a child, then for the repeated occasions that he was instructed to do one thing but somehow ended up achieving another thing entirely outside what was requested. (Not quite a little cherub, was I? At least all those shrieks were employed to good use in adulthood. I wondered now if Panto suffered from any loss of hearing in his later years? I might just feel a little guilty).

Off Panto went, taking the noticeboard with him to the airport, while Dad merrily headed for his daily badminton happy hour.

A few hours later, Panto called our family home from a public pay phone. My dad was still busy chasing after shuttlecocks around the neighbourhood sports hall, so Panto spoke to my Mum:

“Hello, Ma’am,” (presumably scratching his head), “is this Peter Woon Chinese or Indian?”

“Huh...? Panto, who is in the car now? A Chinese man, or Indian??” Mum asked warily.

Panto, surreptitiously peering towards the car from the public phone by the roadside, “Eh, Indian, Ma’am. Confirmed, Indian. I just checked again. His hair is wrapped (i.e., a Sikh gentleman).”

“Panto! Oh dear. Peter Woon is Chinese! You fetched him at least five times before! Where is Mr Woon??” Mum panicked.

“Oh no, Ma’am! So sorry! Ah! This is the man’s fault! This was what happened: in the airport he looked at me, I looked at him. He pointed at me, I also pointed at him. Then he shook his head (this means yes, right?). So I nodded my head. Must be this person, *lah*. He saw my noticeboard already. Then he followed me to the car. Ma’am, he has so many suitcases! Five, you know. Massive ones! *Alamak*, like he is taking his whole house. One could not fit in the boot; I had to try and squeeze it in the front seat!” he babbled on nervously.

The car being stuffed to the roof with suitcases was the least of anyone’s worries at that moment, but he rambled on. The Indian man was indeed going to Borobudur Hotel too, as indicated on the noticeboard the driver was carrying—just not quite the same five-star establishment that our missing Mr Woon was supposed to be housed in, but rather one dubious motel in a suburb somewhere on the outskirts of Jakarta.

Panto ended the call and rushed back to the airport, along with the mistaken guest on the back seat. Before reaching the airport, Panto planned to abandon the Indian gentleman and his five large suitcases unceremoniously on a street sidewalk. The Indian gentleman protested and, using Tarzan-like sign language, indicated that he wished to be driven to *his* Borobudur Hotel. Panto, flustered, decided that the best compromise would be to deposit the man and his suitcases at the nearest love motel that offered hourly rates on the way to the airport, which he did.

When Panto returned to the airport, as one would predict, Mr Woon was nowhere to be found. He had reached the correct

Borobudur Intercontinental Hotel on his own, safely in a taxi, and had informed my dad so.

\* \* \*

The following day at the office...

Panto was sitting around waiting in the garage when an office colleague approached. He looked sombre.

“Hey, ”To, I read this morning at *Pos Kota* (a trashy tabloid in Jakarta known to report the most incredulous crime news of the day) about a driver who kidnapped this Indian businessman and stole his five suitcases. It said that the police are looking for this driver.”

Spooked as expected, Panto asked: “Really? Where?? Where is the article?? Let me see.”

“Ah, I did not keep the newspaper, I’ve left it somewhere. But you can buy it outside if you like.”

Panto feigned a sudden excuse, saying he would like to go to the mosque to pray (it was not even a Friday), and off he went on a discrete hunting rampage to all the convenience stores within reasonable radius of the office, to get a hold of said tabloid—and other equally cheesy tabloids, just in case.

Seated safely back in his driver’s corner table an hour or so later, he flapped open the newspaper spreads in their full glory and consumed all the city’s goriest news for the day before he finally realized he had been pranked.

That day, Panto was again to pick up the yet to be seen Mr Peter Woon at the hotel.

Scratching his head (again), Panto apologised to my dad for picking up the wrong guest.

“Panto, from now on this is your instruction, ok. Whenever you are fetching a guest, ask for his name card. Repeat after me in English: ‘Name card, please.’”

“Name card, please,” Panto parroted my dad, successfully.

“And then when you reached the hotel, you call the guest’s room using the hotel’s house phone, and go up and wait outside the room,” my dad meticulously instructed.

Mumbling his instructions carefully, he headed to the Borobudur Hotel. The five-star one, not the love motel. He was told not to be late, as the two business partners were to head together to the airport for a business trip to Bandung, another city in Indonesia. On the way though, he got into a minor collision with a motorcycle. No one was harmed, but onlookers were starting to surround the car and the motorcycle rider, watching their exchange.

When they started questioning him, Panto decided the best way to solve his problem was to pass the buck onto my dad. He took out Dad’s box of name cards from the glove box and hastily gave them out freely to all the onlookers: “Ah, here, here. One for you, and one for you (and so on). Any problem, just call my boss. There, his name, his number. All there. Ok.”

He finished up giving away nearly the entire content of Dad's name cards box, exchanged details with the motorbike rider, and hastily resumed his journey.

Upon arrival at the correct hotel, Panto rang Mr Woon's room as instructed. "Sir, I come to your room," said Panto, reading out aloud from Dad's preprepared typed-out script.

Peter Woon, who had met Panto many times before, chuckled dismissively and said, "Ha, ha. No need. Just meet me at the lift. I will come down now."

The lift door opened momentarily at the hotel's ground floor, where Panto was waiting. A Chinese-looking gentleman emerged. Panto pointed to the man and then to himself and then repeated the exercise, to ensure that this was the correct man. They nodded at each other and off they went to the head office in the company car.

Upon arrival, the businessman (Singaporean, as it turned out) seemed confused, peering right and left on the backseat windows and uneasily enquiring, "Office? Office???"

Ms Nani, the company secretary, greeted the guest and discovered the second case of mistaken identity (but the first one for the day). At the same time the ever-elusive Mr Peter Woon rang and told my dad that the driver was again AWOL. Dad pointed out that Woon should have waited at his room as recommended earlier, and only God knew who the mistaken guest for the day was, who in turn appeared more anxious by the minute.

Panto, slapping his forehead, quickly sprinted back to the car with the confused Singaporean trailing in his wake, "Wait for me! Wait for me!!"

Back at the hotel lobby, a quick swap of two similar-looking businessmen ensued, with each going inside their correct vehicles this time. Planting himself securely on the driver's seat, Panto turned around and asked Mr Peter Woon:

"Name card, *please*."

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## Chapter 5

### A CHICKEN SURPRISE

**WARNING:**

*The stunts in this story were performed by professionals. For your safety and for the protection of those around you, do not attempt any of the stunts you're about to read.*

It's not every day that one gets to guard a chicken coop.

Especially not in the case of Simeon.

Simeon, only son of a wealthy Singaporean family, had a long stint in the United States. His parents had sent him over to study graphic design at what they perceived was one of the best institutions for that purpose—and study he did, *graphically*. He, and all ten of his fast cars, accompanied by equally graphic (and fast) ladies of C-rated movies.

After way too many years of ‘emergencies’ on the emergency-only credit card supplied by Simeon’s father, the man turned up in New York unannounced, to retrieve his only son. By then, both father and son were no longer spring chickens, and his father thought it was time to get serious.

Upon his return to Singapore, Simeon received a notice for his annual Operationally Ready National Service<sup>1</sup>, which was many times overdue, seeing as he had not come back once since commencing his very graphic studies many moons ago.

On the first day reporting for duty, 35-year-old Simeon discovered that he was the most mature camp member (if not by behaviour, than at least by age), even compared to his superior officers and instructors.

“Yes, sir!” replying to his superiorly younger superior, when asked to confirm his identity.

He glanced at Simeon’s record. It showed that he was a much slower runner and of a C-pass overall fitness level. Everyone was ranked according to a certain kind of standardized fitness test, which included (if not most importantly), how fast one could run. I guessed if all else failed, these boys needed to be able to run, and fast. Simeon was a lot of things and a budding bodybuilder at heart, but a short distance runner he was not. Hence, the mediocre fitness grade.

---

1. There is a mandatory two-year national military service in Singapore, for all male citizens and Permanent Residents (PR) above the age of 18. Upon completion, these cadets may still be recalled as reservists for up to 40 days per year, until the age of 40 or 50, depending on rank.

The newly assembled barrack members were woken abruptly by an instructor after their first night. Needless to say, the boys were not properly dressed when they lined up—Simeon included, having dragged himself out of bed. The instructor, a major, was an impeccably dressed stout man of slightly less desirable Asian height. Simeon could not help noticing one distinct feature of the instructor. It was his ears—they stuck out perceptibly, especially at the top ends. It vaguely reminded Simeon of a certain familiar character. He guessed some people did not win the genetic lottery, nor that the colour green complemented his overall look, but being in the army, one had not much choice with colours. In his defense, whatever he may have lacked in the height (and ears) department, he made it up in vocal prowess. In addition, it looked like on that particular morning PMS was not gender exclusive to women, as the major was seen exhibiting the same signs of irritation and short-temperdness.

“What-do-you-think-I-look-like??!” the major bellowed, enunciating every word, pacing slowly in front of the boys, hands behind his back.

Confused, the boys and Simeon remained quiet. If the question was meant to inspire awe or to intimidate, it certainly did not achieve its intended effect, to enlighten the young cadets to dress better and quicker. I guess that in the event of an actual enemy attack, a certain standard of fashion still needed to be upheld (yes, God forbid that Singapore soldiers should be found with shirts untucked while deadly bullets fly above their heads).

“Whoever can answer me with correct answer, I will reward!” the instructor continued to bellow, in his true blue heartlander accent.

At that moment he paused directly in front of the much older Simeon, whom the former scrutinized up and down, with suspicion.

“YOU! I ask *you* again. When you see me, what do you see?” The short and green figure gestured at his attire from top to bottom, obviously pointing out the different states of tidiness between Simeon’s and his.

Simeon blurted out most officially, “Yoda, sir!” To his immediate regret.

*[Yoda, from Star Wars. It happened to be Simeon’s favourite movie. Though wise the creature may be, green and petite he was too. As in, a short little green alien jedi master, known for his wisdom and knowledge and for his funny, inverted spoken sentences.]*

That stopped the major in his tracks. Annoyed, he asked ominously, “Are you calling me short...?”

“No, sir! Sorry, sir! I mean you are the best, most knowledgeable among us here! Sir!” Simeon blabbed.

Beads of nervous perspiration could be seen on Simeon’s forehead. This reservice had not started off well. “Me and my big mouth,” he mentally chastised himself. “Note to self: *always* shut up.”

“All of you!! Push-up 100 times!” the major ordered. All groaned.

The following day was field training, a ‘How to be a Tarzan 101’ jungle survival crash course. However, before marching the group into the jungle, the same major singled out Simeon and took him aside.

“Do you know how to operate this?” the major indicated a SAR 21 rifle.

“Errrr. No, sir.”

“How ’bout M-16??”

“They taught me, but I forgot, sir.”

The major sighed audibly, and scratching his head, looked on the notepad he was carrying. Suddenly, his eyes widened. He noticed something worrying, if not terrifying. He asked cautiously:

“Your surname is... Do you happen to be related to...” The major gingerly mentioned a familiar name of a certain figure very high up on the country’s political ladder.

“Eh, hmmm. Oh, well. Not *directly*, sir... but...”

Simeon had been asked that question many times before by those who noticed a similarity of facial appearance between him and the political figure with that same surname, which was purely coincidental. It was true, however, that upon

further investigations they were third cousins once removed, by marriage.

Simeon was going to explain, but the shrewd major had quickly come up with a solution. For the benefit of all trainees, and for the sake of his own career. Best to err on the 'safe' side, he thought, just in case this happened to be the nephew of the revered political figure. Here was true evidence that height nor shape of ears were by no means indicative of anyone's intelligence.

*[Thirty minutes later: Simeon found himself tasked with guarding the chicken coop of the camp alongside an obese chef, both sans rifles, as the major decided that neither could be entrusted with weapons.]*

*Should the enemy decide to attack the chicken coop, they would be ill equipped to defend the chickens (and themselves); but it was, after all, a time of peace.]*

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, in another part of the world with a mandatory national service...

Once upon a time, there was a boy named Kim.

There were many, many Kims where he came from. Although they were all Kims, something I observed about the people from that part of the world was, they always asked each other "Which kind of Kim are you?" upon their first meeting. In the nicest, most polite manner.

I also observed that upon receiving the geographical information, one Kim would exhibit a veiled smug expression, which they tried to hide as best (or horribly as they could), to the dismay of the other party. I could only assume, judging from these differing expressions, that there were the posh kind of Kims, and the more... *rural* type of Kims.

All of these Kims, however, banded together in mandatory training (along with all the Parks and the Lees) to defend themselves, in case the not-so-nice kind of Kim up north decided to run amok. Love thy neighbour, not.

Kim Jr. was tall and lanky. Early in his national service, a group of military officers had curiously fetched him out of nowhere, to be trained elsewhere.

They turned out to be the Special Forces division, i.e., the group of soldiers who would be deployed first via parachute (or via helicopter, or whatever) across enemy lines should the not-so-nice Kim decide to attack. Kim Jr.'s height had made him an attractive candidate for that role.

The first training he was required to do, was to jump off a building from a 15-metre height. For Kim, it was far scarier to be able to see the ground at that height, rather than having to jump from a level where the ground was but a fuzzy mirage.

His instructor had supplied each cadet with a curious instruction: "As you jump, shout your girlfriend's name!! For those who do not have a girlfriend, shout your *mother's* name!"

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One by one the boys jumped, each with a feminine name yelled out for courage.

When it was his turn, Kim contemplated. He did wonder if the girl he briefly dated before he commenced his national military service was considered his girlfriend, but then they only had tea. He decided on, “Ommaaaaa.....!” on his descent.

His mother, whose name he screamed the whole 15-metre plunge, was profoundly disturbed upon learning that her precious son had to jump off a building.

She picked up the telephone.

The following week, Kim found himself promoted to the Special Forces’ paratrooper division. A highly tactical combat unit, the parachutes *sewing* team.

She must have dialed the right number.



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## Chapter 9

### ***Apri La Bocca! Means Open Your Mouth***

Most students of classical singing would have had the experience of learning from several teachers as part of their evolution as a singer. Teachers and students of singing have an emotionally intertwined professional (sometimes lifelong) relationship, which could be one of ‘love-hate’, or ‘love-love’, or pure terror. No other form of performance is more exposing than live singing. We have to face you, the audience, head on. Unlike instrument players, we cannot hide. We actually have to look at you. We were also often told to imagine the audience as monkeys, but that does not always work.

Unlike other instruments, our teachers are our sculptors. An advanced listener would be able to detect the trademark opening gambit of certain teachers, even from the way we delivered our first note. (P.S., on a different note: never ask an opera singer if he or she “*play an instrument*”. We *are* the instrument. A living,

breathing pipe instrument, who can scream at you without the aid of microphones if we get asked this question one more time. And no, *Phantom of the Opera* is *not* an opera.)

Learning on the hills of Tuscany taught us young students many things. A certain glamorous yet unusually skinny Taiwanese soprano turned up with her customary uniform of high heels, high hair, and five litres of perfume. Throughout the summer she had had a good exercise running up and down those hilly Chianti winery estates, where our student housing was, being chased by bees. (Note to self: the wearing of perfume is highly inadvisable on such a terrain. Perfume meant flowers, and bees liked flowers.)

We were all geared up to presumably be instructed firmly in public by our esteemed teacher that whole summer, in the hope of learning some precious gems of techniques or artistry on this classical art.

A rather unlucky Japanese tenor bravely chose to present a very famous tenor aria, “*È lucevan le stelle*”, on the first day of the course. It was the piece sung by Tosca’s lover, Cavaradossi, as he awaited his next day’s execution in a cell, contemplating his ill fate and love. Displeased with the interpretation of this famous aria, our *maestro* enquired:

“How long have you learned singing?”

“Ten years,” the student said.

“Please go back and shoot your teacher,” came the response.

In another course somewhere in Emilia-Romagna, the vespa-riding, pot-bellied *maestro* favoured standing at the far back of the room (trust me, it really did not matter where he stood, he could be heard from *anywhere*). Mind you: it was a large room, as these courses tended to take place in old regional ducal palaces. Glamorous, you’d think?

Until you were locked up in one of those rooms, singing solo. See, what happened was, if you sung like shit, you’d be ordered to contemplate your vocal sins in solitary confinement in one of those rooms in the tower. You would then start thinking just how many dead people had occupied these rooms before you. And if they were still around, watching you... unseen. You would then dearly hope to fix your mistakes before it got dark.

Speaking of old palaces, I personally could never get used to a certain palace’s exhibition of historical old costumes, presumably worn by the old tenants of these rooms. These headless floating ghosts were lit from above, in a glass display cabinet, lining up the dark hallway. I suggested to the palace manager that they should consider redecorating, as some of these old palaces could totally do with it, at least a fresh coat of paint or two. The warden did not seem to appreciate the suggestion. Oh well, never mind.

There was another tenor in this particular advance course, a native Italian this time, who was learning to sing a rather obscure romantic aria. The *maestro* commented: “Why shout like this? You want to wake lover up, or wake whole village? Caress, caress. Gently, gently, like this,” in an instruction ironically yelled from

the back of the room to the terrified student-tenor standing in front of the class, next to the grand piano.

We students cowered in our seats; our faces drained of colour. We each waited for our turn, while the student singing in front of the class was being vocally dissected. I wondered if this was how animals felt in a slaughterhouse. Two very young aspiring Australian sopranos, one blonde, one dark, burst out in tears. A common sight. I guess fear knew no colour.

As for me: Cry?? Oh-ho. Never. I never cried. Ah, that would be embarrassing. I was made of a much tougher stock. Just nearly passed out from hyperventilating.

Our *maestro* in Siena, on the other hand, favoured sitting at the front, perched on his cushioned seat and table on the side of the class, this time an even more glamorous palace room which belonged to a local prince. He sat with his elbows on the table, one hand covering his forehead (presumably having a headache from listening to us all day), eyes shut. Once he was a mighty Italian *basso* (male singer of the base vocal range) of international fame. Despite his imposing figure, his presence at times undetectable, he looked almost asleep. Until...

“STOPPPPP!!! START, AGAIN! From beginning. YES. *O Dio, che terribile!* (almost to himself). Not like chopping woods! Do it again. From beginning.”

One student was so stressed that every time she sang, both her hands went up in the air on her sides. Like a bird. Mimicking her,

he said, “*Perchè ballare così???*” (“Why do you dance like this??”) Which stressed the hell out of the singer even more. Now, what stressed *me* was when he uttered the word, “NEXT!”

The word I did not like to hear. My turn to be grilled. God, it took guts to be an opera singer. One had better grow one hell of a thick skin, and quick.

Sometimes if it was good (or bad) enough, we could cause the *maestro* to stand up. And when he was satisfied with our singing, it would be the most gratifying reward.

No such luck on my first day in. He asked to see the whole repertoire I had brought, and upon examining it promptly dumped it in the rubbish bin across the room, dusted his hands clean, and went back to his seat. He gave me a whole new repertoire better suited for my voice type, to be learned as fast as I could, before my turn for getting yelled at the next day.

I was glad he did not tell me to shoot my teacher.

From my time there, I observed the Italians (unlike the English) were not too preoccupied with diction. For the benefit of the general public, crisp pronunciation of consonants in words. For them this would be a natural by-product if one would sing in the healthy, frontal way.

Their only preoccupation was for us to deliver that beautiful smooth vocal line that is called ‘*Bel Canto*’. Directly translated as ‘Beautiful Singing’, it focused on delivering the vowels through

the air instead of focusing on consonants. This style did not rely on brute force, it was not about vigorously pushing a mass of air in order to be loud. If one projected the notes through the correct ‘tunnel’, he or she would be heard. The secure achievement of this technique ensured vocal longevity without a wobble (unlike some other schools of thought that relied on other aspects), and hopefully without nodules; and hence, the likes of Placido Domingo and his esteemed cohort could sing well into, and some beyond, their 70s.

One instruction most commonly yelled at us by all of these holy legends of the stage was “*APRI LA BOCCA!*” meaning “Open your mouth!”, with the *maestro* or *maestra* demonstrating how to drop one’s chin (*never* jaw), in a clean vertical line, with the engagement of one’s *maschera* (or the ‘mask’ area of eyes, nose, and the area above the lips). While this seems confusingly technical, if all else fails, just remember to open one’s mouth. You would be at least halfway there.

At the end of the month-long course, the towering, beautiful old singing warhorse grabbed me with both hands and lifted me at least a metre above ground, when I thanked him and said goodbye. He was *that* big.

I finally found my eternal learning happiness in later years, with my Polish-Australian teacher, former principal *mezzo soprano* of Opera Australia, known for singing ‘only major roles’ for over twenty years, whom for the purpose of this book will simply be referred to as J.N.

Made in Europe she might have been, but as far as I was concerned, one of the very best exports that came out of Australia. Potty-mouthed, eagle-eyed and extremely sharp, yet warm-hearted, she was a powerhouse with a true heritage of *Bel Canto* singing technique. It was thanks to her I could now scream very high. She made me Queen of the Night.

In heavily European-accented English, she would impart her wisdom during lessons:

“CHRISTINA!! DO NOT CLOSE YOUR TRAPS!! THREE FINGERS!!!”, referring to how wide I should gape—vertically of course.

Or: “Listen. *Netrebko* opens her traps, and so will you!!”

And finally—most philosophically—on airflow: “There is only one kind of air that goes back, and that is called *fart*. It is *not* for singing.”

\* \* \*

*Epilogue:* a distant memory of my mother chastising me as a five year old to keep my mouth shut. After I remarked aloud my observation of a bank manager—from whom my mum was desperately begging for a corporate loan—that his protruding teeth resembled a fully spread Chinese fan. Not sure how this ‘open your mouth’ business was going to work in my other walks of life. It seemed counter-intuitive. I’m sure the bank manager would agree.

# Sample Spreads For Review

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Christina and her family have called Singapore home for over two decades. Indonesian-born, she subsequently went on to experience life in several other countries, including Australia and the U.K., and merrily collected four degrees along the way. Half for herself, half for her beloved parents.

As an amiable observer of people, she finds human nature fascinating and a great source of inspiration.

As a soprano she trained at the Royal Academy of Music in London and has enjoyed singing at the Carnegie Hall in New York.

Today, Christina regularly appears in Singapore's opera scene and writes humorous realistic fiction while leading life as a modern single mother.