



[Tim Benjamin 's MADAME X](#) by [RNCM](#)

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) October 2014

The lights go up on the stage and we see Masetto (a painter) and Zerlina (his lover and muse and the model for his paintings). Surrounding them are paintings done by Masetto, who reels off the titles (*Woman With Flowered Hat!*). They are interrupted by Botney, who is Masetto's agent, he announces himself (*The lovers! There's no place like home*). Two couples enter with Mr Wilmore (a wealthy capitalist) who catches sight of Zerlina (

What lovely creature is this?
).

There then follows a very funny sketch as the two couples harass the painter about the styles he works with. The painter is angered by the intrusions and has to be pacified so as not to upset the couples who are potential customers (*Kill not the goose that lays the golden egg!* Botney tells him).

Lady Brannoch (a wealth aristocrat) enters and introduces herself (*...I am the Lady Brannoch, Dowager Countess of Brannoch* ...). Botney takes it upon himself to introduce Lady Brannoch to the Masetto (*... the foremost artist of his generation* ...) and goes on to show Lady Brannoch Masetto's works. Whilst the others are viewing the paintings Wilmore corners Zerlina. He disparages her life with Masetto (*. . . such delicate perfections, all thrown away upon a senseless rustic . . .*). She tells him that she is to marry Masetto but he persists. He tells her that if he cannot have her then he will have her likeness and announces that he will buy all the paintings and leaves.

Lady Brannoch dismisses Wilmore's announcement and says that she wishes Masetto to paint her portrait (*Some have to buy their art. Others, with considerably greater taste, have it made.*) There is a call for wine and the couples demand a song from Zerlina (*Good people all, don't pass us by/Come in and drink if you are dry*).

When the couples leave, Botney stays behind with Masetto and Zerlina. He tells the painter that all the paintings have been sold, and Zerlina asks that Botney show them the money, saying that they need it for food and heating. Botney tells them that he is to have half of what has been sold as his commission, due to his expenses, leaving them with nothing from the sale. He tells Masetto though that he still has to negotiate a fee with Lady Brannoch before leaving.

The next morning Masetto and Zerlina are in bed when Lady Brannoch arrives to sit for her portrait. Masetto takes out his box of props and hands them, one by one, to Lady Brannoch, suggesting a title for the painting (*Still Life With Basket Of Apples...*) Lady Brannoch rejects all the suggestions and orders Masetto to paint her as a youth (*Youth! My youth, and my looks! You must paint them/as they are, they must be radiant!*), she tells him that a straight forward portrait would be best and takes her place. Whilst Masetto is lining up the painting he mocks Lady Brannoch and Zerlina and he giggles over his suggestions for a title (*The Anatomy of the Horse .../ Sketch of a Crab*) – Here the audience has to suspend belief as the last thing anyone would think about Taylor Wilson, who sings the role of Lady Brannoch, is that she bears any resemblance either to a horse or a crab). Lady Brannoch leaves and the two lovers continue mocking her.

Later, whilst Masetto is working on the portrait, Wilmore arrives. He tells them that he is aware that they have no money and that if Zerlina would spend the night with him he would make a *small donation, a little something to see you through the next few weeks.* Zerlina, though reluctant, sees no other way and convinces Masetto that she will be safe (... *I will not allow him to dishonour you*). They leave as Wilmore tosses money to Masetto.

The next morning is Sunday and people are on their way to Mass. Masetto had been drinking and the people in the street have awoken him (*The City Rises... Early Sunday Morning...*). The portrait he is working on has a canvass sheet covering it. He hears a shout (

Murder! Dead body!

) that a corpse has been found, floating in the canal. Masetto thinks of Zerlina and looks out of the window, but he cannot see any corpse. Two passers-by confirm that it is the body of Zerlina.

Botney arrives to find the painter in despair and they exchange words. The painter lets it be known that he suspects Wilmore of murdering Zerlina, though Botney assures him that was could not be so (*No, no, this was late last night, I am sure it was long after the fair Zerlina departed*). Botney presses the artist to finish the painting of Lady Brannoch, which he intends for Wilmore to have, insisting that Masetto must make the portrait as much like Zerlina.

Masetto starts drinking. He hits on the idea of poisoning the wine that will be drunk by the guest at the unveiling of his portrait of lady Brannoch/Zerlina (*Socrates Drinking The Hemlock!*).

When Botney arrives he finds the painter passed out on the floor and tells Masetto to wake up and get ready for the unveiling. The guests arrive they pester the painter with questions. When the unveiling takes place it is Zerlina that stands in the frame, which everyone sees except Lady Brannoch who thinks it is her portrait (*It is just like a mirror! Quite extraordinary! How accurately he captures me!*).

Zerlina begins to move, then steps out of the frame. Everyone is silent as she pours the wine for each guest who collapse and die. We see the lovers disappear through the picture frame.

Benjamin has put a lot of care into developing the characters whilst Wilmore (sung by the baritone Marc Callahan - representing 'new' money) and Lady Brannoch (sung by the mezzo-soprano Taylor Wilson - representing 'old money') come across as caricatures, Botney and Masetto seem devoid of character. The former speaks in proverbs whilst the latter speaks in titles of paintings. I did find myself being a bit irritated at Botney (sung by the Baritone, Jon Stainsby), yet I do think that the portrayal of Botney illustrated the vacuity of simply chasing after money.

The role of Masetto (sung by the tenor Tom Morss) as the pathetic lover is similarly a portrayal of a one-dimensional character, whose love for Zerlina seems be that she is his muse and he can only paint her. The seduction scene at the beginning of the opera, when Wilmore cajoles Zerlina to dine with him, is reminiscent of Don Giovanni's seduction of Zerlina in Mozart's opera. The only character that does come across as fully formed and unpretentious is Zerlina (sung by the soprano Laura Sheerin).

The cast were excellent both in acting and in singing. The tender opening scene where Masetto reels off titles of paintings as amusement is beautifully played out and Morss' voice captured the feeling of playful affection perfectly. Zerlina's song, in act 1, *Good people all, don't pass us by*, was, I suspect, the highlight for many in the audience.

Taylor Wilson has a fine voice, which she projected well. I like the mezzo voice very much, but in live performances it is not always easy to hear what is being sung. Maybe Ms Wilson benefited from the fact that the music was provided by a septet. From her introduction (*A “lady ship” sails the seven seas and a “madam” entertains the sailors.*) to the unveiling of the painting, in act 3, she proved a powerful presence.

Jon Stainsby has a wonderful voice. He handled the role of Botney very well. You have the impression that the Botney character is intended to be irritating in what he says, thus creating a tension that only the comic can release. I feel that he did this well, and in some places I found myself warming to Botney, however one-dimensional he was.

Marc Callahan has a more mature baritone which suited the role of Wilmore well, especially in the seduction scene. His put down of Botney (*I have been to see your man, Botney, that's his name?*) displayed a well measured amount of menace and contempt.

The music was fascinating to hear. Madam X is certainly a modern composition, yet it is also very melodic, which is not something normally associated with modern opera. Tim Ashley, in the [Guardian](#) complained: “Spotting the [musical] allusions eventually becomes an end in itself and detracts from the dramatic momentum”. The score contains quotes from other compositions; from baroque to 20th century pieces. I didn't find this a distraction at all. It felt as if Benjamin had created a musical tapestry, or more precisely, a collage. It worked well in capturing the emotions of the drama or adding emotion when none was provided on stage. The septet could easily be heard as another voice, alluding to other musical compositions in the same manner that Masseto alludes to paintings. What is noticeable about Madam X right from the introduction (that gave us a beautiful violin solo), is how tightly the music is throughout the opera. The musicians were outstanding in their execution.

I regret that I could not get to the premier of Madame X, Hippodrome, Todmorden in August and that this performance was the final one of the tour. But I do feel that there will be more performances - it would be criminal otherwise.