

## Gripping opera double bill

By IFAN PAYNE

THE Cardiff New Opera Group presented a stimulating and grippingly performed double bill at Chapter on Saturday.

The programme consisted of *Mr Punch* by Michael Finnissy and Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs For A Mad King*.

This latter work, in the form of a dramatic monologue, is a setting of eight poems by Randolph Stow which are based on the words of King George III.

The sense of claustrophobic paranoia was brilliantly conveyed by the CNOG with the six instrumentalists dressed in white coats suggestive of asylum orderlies.

In the taxing role of the King, Kelvin Thomas deserves the highest praise for so effectively portraying the bedlam and madness among the bird calls.

Michael Rafferty and Michael McCarthy also deserve the highest praise for creating such a strong effect out of an economy of means, an effect which was heightened by the appropriately stark auditorium at Chapter.

And Peter Maxwell Davies must again be admired for his scintillating music which, after more than a decade and a half, is still such a breathtaking mixture of the neurotic, the tuneful and the humorous.

The tale of Punch and Judy continues to hold the attention of contemporary composers. On the one hand Harrison Bir-

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twistle chose to use the story as the basis for a wider commentary on the human condition.

On the other, Michael Finnissy has stripped the situation down to a lean and powerful minimum.

Designer Angharad Roberts and the director Michael McCarthy have produced an effective theatre work — a silent opera if there is such a beast — in which Finnissy's economic and telling music heightens the sadistic jocularity of the mute Punch.

The taught and disturbing *Mr Punch* would make a wonderful double bill with *I Pagliacci* to which it would be a powerful foil and effective corrective.

Eric Roberts was the virtuosic narrator who spoke all the parts, Brendan Charleson mimed Punch with an appropriately sickening, cheerful violence and Alan Oaty mimed the roster of victims from Dog to Devil.

Once again Michael Rafferty led the musicians in an effective performance of great skill.

The CNOG now embark on a 13-venue tour of Wales and as one of the most stimulating and adventurous music and theatre groups in the region they deserve the greatest success in developing both their audience and their financial stability.