

# Soft and sinuous sounds

## MUSIC

### Fauré Requiem

TEMPLE CHURCH, EC4

AN EXQUISITE, eloquently voiced and profoundly touching performance of Fauré's *Requiem* formed the basis of this concert, and it was set in a context that evocatively encapsulated the sophisticated resonances of French church music. In an early-evening programme lasting just an hour, the Choir of the Temple Church, conducted by James Vivian, also sang Fauré's *Cantique de Jean Racine*, the two choral works interleaved by the organist Greg Morris's playing of Jeanne Demessieux's *Attende Domine* and Marcel Dupré's *Cortège et Litanie*.

Save in the realms of the organ loft, the name of Jeanne Demessieux might not be all that familiar, but those of the older generation might recall that at her London debut in 1947 she improvised a four-movement organ symphony on themes submitted by London music critics. A musician of enormous prestige, she was organist at La Madeleine in Paris and also composed a fair amount of music, including the *12 Chorale Preludes on Gregorian Themes* from which the Lenten *Attende Domine* comes.

Hauntingly preceded here by the men of the choir intoning the plainchant on which the piece is based, Morris's playing not only

illuminated the music's ingenuity and contrapuntal complexity of texture but also expressively wove the web of sinuous, chromatic harmonies that swathes the plainchant melody. The *Cortège et Litanie* by Dupré, one of Demessieux's teachers, was equally telling and, at the climactic end, thrilling in its choice of colours.

The Temple Church Choir, comprising here 15 boy choristers and a dozen men, is a formidable force, finely honed and blended, and capable of a sound that can range from a firm, fully focused *fortissimo* to the softest, mellifluous lyricism. The latter quality was particularly in evidence in the *Cantique de Jean Racine*, with a text that Racine based on portions of the Roman breviary and in which Fauré clothed the words with a refined simplicity.

The *Requiem* capitalised on a wider spectrum of the choir's sonority. At one extreme there was the hushed singing of the "Sanctus", beautifully offset by the harpist Sally Pryce, and the solo "Pie Jesu", tenderly sung with clear, pure tone and poignancy by the boy treble Charles McNelly. At the other was the powerful, wrathful attack on "Dies illa, dies irae", prefaced by the sense of foreboding that the baritone Thomas Guthrie instilled into the "Libera me". This was a performance of perfectly poised fluency, quiet intensity and consolatory contemplation.

**Geoffrey Norris**

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