A LONDON LETTER

RABBI DR. ANDRÉ UNGAR

Former Rabbi of the Port Elizabeth Progressive Jewish Congregation
Now Rabbi of the Settlement Synagogue, London

LAST night—or rather, this morning—The Treason Trials came to London. The 156 black, brown and pink faces, photographed like some old school reunion, grin defiantly from off the cover of the Souvenir Programme, sold at two bob a piece. That strange complex atmosphere (abounding good humour and deep seriousness) spills over from the Drill Hall in Johannesburg into London's Festival Hall. Except that in place of the dull drone of legal goings-on, the rhythm is that of jazz at its dazzling best. Organized by Christian Action, the concert had a warmer and more catholic advance drumbeat of publicity than anything London can remember for a long time. Cassandra in the *Daily Mirror*, Critic in the *New Statesman* begged their readers to support it. The Sunday *Observer* gave a perfectly timed profile of Humphrey Lyttleton two days before. Morning papers, evening papers, right, left, joined in heralding the event.

At half past ten the Festival Hall comes alive with the crowd rushing to their cars, trains, buses, bicycles, after Klemperer's Beethoven concert. It would seem that soon the place will turn in to sleep as on any other night. But, no, the South Bank remains awake. Or rather begins to wake up in full earnest, an unusual thing in London's to-bed-with-the-hens provincial routine. The Jazz Concert is due to start half-an-hour before midnight. Why? Some say the Hall could not have been booked at any ordinary hour for months ahead. Some say that the midnight session is just another of the darkly mysterious rituals of the dixieland brood.

The enormous foyer is humming with a strangely concocted audience. Suburban skiffle kids, highbrow connoisseurs from Knightsbridge, Ghanian students, diplomats, duly collared clergymen, experience-hungry Jo'burg businessmen with omnivorous wives or bored local substitutes—corduroys, evening dresses, saris, turbans, pinstripes. There's Solly Sachs, fresh back from France. A liberal lawyer from Port Elizabeth with his young wife. A daughter of Durban English aristocracy with a handsome Jamaican escort. Canon Collins, a stage vicar about to open the parish bazaar, smooth, smiling, worried—

except that the bazaar is on a tremendous scale, and the funds are not for a new organ. Lord Astor in the offing. Father Huddleston, gaunt and intense, with a pink-faced young colleague from the Community. Teddy-bear-like, Victor Gollancz ambles about. And South Africans galore—Raikin the pianist, Phillips the singer, Guy, the universal London uncle. Brought here by the love of jazz or the love of justice, or both, the milling multitude is waiting for the pips.

The pips begin: metallic, insistent, synthetic yet soft—it's time to go in. The tremendous hall swiftly fills up. The lights dim. On the stage, two of Britain's top sets of entertainers are warming into action. Johnny Dankworth, looking like a tame junior bank clerk, with his orchestra. Soon enough he has shed the appearance of timid insignificance, and Johnny and his boys in red—what a magnificent line of trombones!—rock the midnight audience with the lilt. Then over to 'Hump' Lyttleton: huge chunk of a man, balding on top, his socks fallen crinkled to his ankles, a ridiculous hunter's hat dangling on the end of his gleaming trumpet. They play it cool, classically cerebral. A small ensemble, each one a virtuoso: the self-assured elegance of their playing comes over triumphantly.

And then, almost cartwheeling with joy and excitement, in rolls a fat little Negro in evening dress: Lionel Hampton, who flew over from New York (having given up a whole week's engagement) to give his services for nothing; for love, in the full meaning of the phrase. There is something incredibly elemental in the way that man can give himself; exuberant, child-like, superbly polished, puckish yet perfectly controlled. So far the shining vibraphone—surely the most repulsive and inhuman of all instruments—has been standing in frigid nouveau-riche self-containment on the middle of the stage. A ribbed, silver table, vulgar and (till then) silent. Hampton goes for it. He caresses it, tickles it, hypnotizes it, drools over it, bullies, punishes the thing. The tones he produces are crystal clear, precise, restrained, and yet filled with his own humanity and kindness and altogether beautiful. At each sound he produces Lionel is as thrilled as a child with a new toy; and proud too. He jumps with delight, his eyes gleam, for a moment he forgets the vibraphone and dives into the band's background noise; then back to his beastly instrument and his act of musicianship, conjuring ecstasy. The reflection of the shining

object jerks and claps like a huge glittering chromium crab above the organ pipes on the roof of the Festival Hall; blinding and mesmeric and as a strange, unasked-for yet relevant ballet. Suddenly a most incredible vocal newcomer appears on, and in, the auditory scene. A groan that is also a belch, a giggle that sharpens into a bleat, an impossibly ugly, organic, humanly wise and tender, instinctively communicated monstrosity. Lionel Hampton is laughing while he plays. Like a hairy, scruffy little Tartar, his laughter rides on the back of the perfectly groomed, superior, proudly prancing Pegasus of music coming from the vibraphone. The contrast is stunning. At the same time, his magnificently articulate playing of the gleaming machine and the quite inarticulate noises issuing from his lips and throat and belly and boots blend in exquisite harmony. Then he gets tired of the contraption and takes over at the drums, savage and sophisticated all at once. He is submerged in the music he makes and evokes from the two bands—and yet remains in absolute command, fully conscious artistic control, of himself and his fellow players and, above all, a by then enchanted public.

In the row ahead of me, nestled in the huge armchair of the terrace stalls, a West Indian teenager is in a state that resembles epilepsy. His shoulders wriggle, his head lolls on one side, he claps the beat with his hands in broad, undulating movements, astonishingly, almost sadly, silent when his palms meet. It seems more of a dance, a ritual, a trance with him than anything else. At the end of the row, two fair-haired semi-teddy boys nod the beat in strict simultaneity; wide-eyed with wonder, lovably naive. Next to them a lanky schoolboy. He too keeps nodding; but his nods syncopate with those of his neighbours. Further down, a donnish creature seems to survey the crowd with hard-kept sociological curiosity. But only for a moment. Then the eddy of jazz catches him again, and he is sucked down.

Could anything less congruous than a monk appear in the middle of all this? Yet that is exactly what happens. The Festival Hall becomes as quiet and solemn as a cathedral. Trevor Huddleston is at the microphone. His voice is firm, calm, reasoned, his words almost labouredly free from artifice. "Member of the British Commonwealth. . . . Our own moral responsibility. . . ."

Purses open. Hearts open. And the jazz flows on, sweeping broadly like the Thames towards a dull autumn London dawn.