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Reader's Digest

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◀ Is this man bigger than we, the people?

Music's Stormy Petrillo

Condensed from Life • Robert Coughlan

LAST JULY James Caesar Petrillo made his own peculiar contribution to national morale. An orchestra of 160 boys and girls had been scheduled to broadcast over NBC from the National Music Camp at Interlochen, Michigan. All arrangements were made. What the proud parents listening-in heard, however, was not the adolescent tootlings of their young but the music of a studio orchestra. The broadcast had been canceled on Petrillo's orders, because the boys and girls were not members of the American Federation of Musicians which he heads. The fact that they were too young to join the union didn't worry Petrillo.

"They're amateurs," he said. "When amateur musicians occupy

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At 28 Robert Coughlan is already a veteran writer on labor topics. For the past five years he has been an associate editor of *Fortune*, the youngest ever appointed. He contributes steadily to *Fortune* and *Life*, and, for a busman's holiday, to *The New Yorker*. Mr. Coughlan is the son of a Kokomo, Indiana, high school teacher. He began his writing career on the college daily at Northwestern University.



the air it means less work for professionals." The way out would be to hire 160 union musicians to "stand by"—i.e., do nothing—while the youngsters played.

Although laymen may find it hard to see the difference between this and the regulation "shake-down" of an ordinary racket, the "stand-by" is an AFM institution. So, for that matter, is Petrillo's dislike for musical children who play in public. A few years ago, when Chicago's *Daily News* bought a giant panda for the zoo and arranged to have it welcomed by Chinese Boy Scout buglers, Petrillo declared that an equal number of his men should stand by. Last winter he successfully prevented broadcasts by children in half a dozen cities.

Petrillo feels even more violently about "canned music" which, he maintains, keeps thousands of live musicians out of work.* Last June he served notice that no more phonograph records could be made after

*See "Petrillo, Dictator of Music," *The Reader's Digest*, November, '40.

July 31 unless the recording companies guaranteed that the records wouldn't be played in juke boxes or over the radio. Since the recording companies have no control over their products after they have been sold, the order means, in effect, that no new recordings can be made at all.

When the history of craft unionism in America is written, Petrillo will probably take his place as the sturdiest wildflower in the American Federation of Labor's whole unruly garden. His powers over the 130,000 members of AFM have astonished, among others, the antitrust division of the Department of Justice, which has called them "absolute and subject to no control." According to the union constitution, Petrillo is able to call strikes at his discretion, can levy fines up to \$5000 on any member, and can also revise or suspend the constitution itself.

His two salaries (as head of the national union and also the Chicago local) total \$46,000, more than the combined salaries of John L. Lewis and William Green. He spends as much as \$150 for his suits. He eats expensively, and until the war shut off his supply drank imported beer. He wears a 2½-carat blue-white diamond.

Visibly a successful man, he takes pride in pointing out that he got where he is without stealing. "Hell," he says, "I don't have to steal. When I need anything I just let my boys

know about it and they give it to me."

When he refers to his "boys" Petrillo means specifically the musicians of Chicago. Their devotion to him is such that one year, according to union figures, Petrillo cost Local 10 \$110,700. The sum included \$26,000 for salary, \$25,000 for a house, \$12,000 to furnish it, \$16,000 to pay income taxes, \$25,000 for a bullet-proof car and bodyguards, and \$6700 for incidentals.

Petrillo likes to think of himself as the benevolent guardian of the boys' interests. "I'm just a big-hearted sap," he says. When pleased he has a benign, grandfatherly look set off by crinkly gray hair and a high, balding forehead. Ordinarily, however, his mouth turns down in a querulous line, and behind his rimless spectacles his pale-blue eyes are cold and suspicious. He has a dazzling vocabulary, which he delivers rapidly in a rasping voice out of the side of his mouth. Though only 5 feet 6 inches tall, he weighs almost 180 pounds. On his feet he moves rapidly and belligerently, working himself up to a fast lope when excited about some outrage done to the "rights" of his boys.

Petrillo is a man of large and catholic dislikes. In a long list of phobias, the Boston Symphony Orchestra — which has been playing under open-shop conditions since its founding in 1881 — ranks near the top. When Conductor Koussevitzky and his men showed an indifference to his efforts to organize them, Pe-

trillo ordered them banned from the air and from phonograph records. "They're washed up," he announced, perhaps too sanguinely.

To cripple the orchestra on its home grounds, he staged a raid on the American Guild of Musical Artists, an AFL union which included virtuosos such as Iturbi, Spalding and Zimbalist. "They're musicians and they belong to me," he declared. "Since when is there a difference between Heifetz and a fiddler in a tavern?"

Rather than sacrifice concert work in AFM territory, which includes every important musical outlet except Boston's Symphony Hall, most of the virtuosos have signed up with Petrillo, which means that they can fill no more dates with the Boston Symphony.

The fact that Koussevitzky and his men continue to play brilliantly and imperturbably despite all this is almost more than Petrillo can bear. As president of the AFM he has routed a dozen seemingly stouter opponents, including the U. S. Army. A year and a half ago, to promote interest in national defense, the Mutual Broadcasting System scheduled a series of broadcasts using army talent. Petrillo announced that no army bands could play over the air until he and Secretary of War Stimson had had a chance to talk it over and mark out terms.

"Sure, Stimson," he explained. "Why fool around with the little guys?" As it turned out, Petrillo

was reduced to negotiating with some generals. "You know how them generals are," he remarked later. "Pin a couple of tin medals on 'em and you can't do a thing wit' 'em." Petrillo soon had them eating out of his hand, however. The upshot was that army bands could play, provided Petrillo gave his consent.

Recently Petrillo found that the army was giving him trouble again. When the orchestra from *This Is the Army* was invited to help dedicate a service men's center in New York, permission was dutifully asked of the New York local, even though the musicians are army men, subject to no authority but the army's. It was refused. Local Head Jake Rosenberg, presumably acting on Petrillo's orders, explained: "If the army goes around playing benefits, we might as well fold up."

Although this incident stirred up criticism, Petrillo yields to no man in patriotism. At his order, his members play *The Star-Spangled Banner* before and after every program, be it night club, Hollywood set or recording studio. In New York City alone, it is estimated, patriots now stand for the national anthem 20,000 times a week.

Although unsympathetic persons call him a dictator, Petrillo often points to himself as an example of what can be accomplished under the American Way. Born in Chicago's West Side, of Italian immigrant parents, as a boy he sold newspapers, ran elevators and drove a delivery cart.

He was an indifferent student, however. When he was eight years old his parents bought him a trumpet. By the time he was 14 he had his own eight-piece dance orchestra and decided to give up his losing fight with the fourth grade and devote his life to music. A few years later, after a brief experience in the saloon business, he joined the AFM. His first job was to organize the town's Chinese restaurants. Petrillo's methods, while lacking in tact, were extraordinarily effective. The Chinese signed up in droves. Local 10, impressed, made him a vice-president and in 1922, president.

The subsequent affairs of Petrillo and Local 10 merge like a lovers' knot. The Local's membership has increased from 4000 to 11,000, with the highest wage scale of any AFM local. "I done it," Petrillo says, "by giving the boys service."

As might be supposed, this service was not performed without opposition. Petrillo has been bombed, sued, investigated by the Department of Justice and reprimanded by the courts. Throughout it all he has remained physically indestructible and emotionally unmoved.

In 1940, while still retaining his job — and salary — with the Chicago local, Petrillo was elected national head of the AFM. He loves his work. "Not for the dough," he explains. "I don't need it any more. I just live for my boys." His business day, a bedlam of long-distance calls, conferences and sudden alarms, leaves

him little time for the finer things. He read a book a few years ago, but didn't care much for it. He is not fond of music. Aside from beer drinking, his chief pleasures are baseball and prize fighting.

Petrillo is devoted to his home town and would like to become its mayor when and if his friend Ed Kelly decides to retire. As a member of the park board and founder of the famous Grant Park summer concerts, he is already well known to Chicago's masses. Petrillo started the concerts in 1935, with union money, as a relief project for Local 10's classical musicians. Later he persuaded his fellow commissioners to put up city money to keep them running. "You feed the animals in the zoo; why not feed my boys?"

Petrillo stands high with his colleagues in the AFL. He has the personal gratitude of President William Green. When Green was ousted by Lewis from the United Mine Workers and found himself in the embarrassing position of being a labor leader without a union, Petrillo promptly enrolled him in the AFM. Green is adept at the musical comb.

Petrillo does not, however, approve of all the tactics used by the AFL unions. A year ago the New York teamsters union served notice that, when out-of-town bands arrive at theaters in taxis and buses, union teamsters must carry the instruments across the sidewalk — at \$10 a day and \$20 a night. Petrillo refused to tolerate such an idea.

The teamsters threw picket lines around the theaters. Petrillo told his men to pay no attention. "Can you imagine them guys?" he recalls indignantly. "They was being *unreasonable!*"

Now two branches of the federal government have come to the conclusion that James Caesar Petrillo himself is being unreasonable. The

Justice Department has filed a bill under the antitrust laws to restrain him from enforcing his ban on recordings. At the same time the Federal Communications Commission has demanded "a full statement of the facts" about the ban on the Interlochen broadcast. But Petrillo has tangled before with units of the government. He has always won.



The Corpse at the Table

From The Saturday Review of Literature

Samuel Hopkins Adams

Author of "Revelry," "It Happened One Night," etc.

WHEN I first heard the story of the two blizzard-bound men on the mountain, I assumed that it was part of the folklore of the Adirondack region. I used it as the background of a short story in *Collier's*, some 35 years ago. At that time I thought it likely that a definite clue to the actual facts might be brought out. Since then, I have questioned many of my fellow alumni of Hamilton College, where I first heard the tale, and, though many of them recall it, none is able to identify the origin. Therefore it may



Who wrote this?

well be that it is folklore on the imaginative rather than on the realistic side, and that some forgotten writer set it down in some forgotten medium. But who wrote it, and where?

AN OCTOBER blizzard had caught two surveyors wholly unprepared in the heart of the Adirondacks. They were Charles Carney and Stephen Estelow, old working companions and close friends. Through gale and drift they floundered doggedly all day, Estelow, powerfully built and more youthful, giv-