THE MUSIC OF JAMES REESE EUROPE FOR VERNON AND IRENE CASTLE

by

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ABSTRACT

James Reese Europe (1881-1919) was one of the leading African American musicians of the first two decades of the twentieth century. He was renowned as a conductor of theater and dance orchestras, a composer of syncopated dance music and popular song, and an advocate for improved opportunities and remuneration for African American professional musicians in New York. From late 1913 until mid-1915, Europe was musical director for the popular exhibition dance team of Vernon (1887-1918) and Irene (1893-1969) Castle. During their brief career, the Castle’s were instrumental in changing the sordid image of social dancing during America’s “dance craze” of the early twentieth century to that of a healthy, sophisticated, and wholesome pastime. From this collaboration came several significant firsts that challenged the practice of strict racial segregation and unequal opportunity for African Americans in the United States. Among these historic firsts were a set of recording sessions and subsequent record releases by Victor, the first such by an African American ensemble. Europe composed eleven original dance compositions for the Castle’s, as a tool for highlighting their signature dances. These compositions were published as solo piano sheet music, and as stock arrangements for flexible orchestra and wind band instrumentation. Three were also recorded as part of the Victor recording sessions. This study includes: the historical background of the Europe/Castle collaboration; analysis and review of the eleven Castle-branded dance composition; a discussion of the Victor recording sessions; a discussion of the connections between the music and the dances for which they were composed. A critical edition of a wind band arrangement of Castle House Rag accompanies this study.