

"The Castles in Europe One-Step (Castle House Rag)"--Europe's Society Orchestra (1914)

Named to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by David Sager



The Castles



Original Label



James Reese Europe

This vigorous and exciting piece of recorded ragtime must have sounded astonishing when it first appeared in 1914; it certainly is astonishing a century later. The sheer vigor and exuberance do not let up during the three-and-a-half minute performance and is unlike anything that had been recorded prior. James Reese Europe's Society Orchestra provides us here with a rare window to peek through and hear tantalizing hints of diverse musical worlds—places that ordinarily did not get represented on phonograph records during the 1910s. Its significance is multi-fold, not the least of which was its *raison d'être*.

In 1914, the most famous exponents of modern social dance were Vernon and Irene Castle. Their revolutionary style did away with bulky moves associated with dances of the late nineteenth century and replaced them with elegant and streamlined athleticism. The Castles brought a new wave of popularity to dancing and much of their popularity was due to their daringness; the white Castles had hired an African-American orchestra to accompany them in a time when such public integration was nearly unknown. James Reese Europe (1881-1919) served as the Castle's musical director. At the time he was America's leading "colored" society orchestra leader, known chiefly for his having organized New York's Clef Club, an organization that served as a union, booking agency, and meeting place for black musicians. Thus, we have a recorded performance of high historic significance as well as a fascinating example of black dance music from an era with almost no such extant documentation and three years before the first jazz recordings were recorded and released.

The Castles' popularity soared with the accompaniment that Europe's musicians provided. The Victor Talking Machine Company, never one to miss an opportunity to exploit a popular movement, chose to record that very orchestra. Featuring a black orchestra was a gamble for Victor, as it was for the Castles who took the risk initially by hiring Europe to play for them. The gamble paid off for all parties—Victor kept this recording in print until 1920—a pretty good run. When the first Europe recordings were done, in December 1913, Victor had only one other black organization in their catalog, the ceremonious Fisk University Jubilee Quartet whose renditions of spirituals reflected a heavily European influence. James Reese Europe too revealed

a strong European compositional influence; however, his philosophy of performance was quite different. He stressed that his textural approach represented Negro music. He told the “New York Evening Post” that in his Negro Symphony Orchestra he employed, “Ten pianos...the result is a background of chords which are essentially typical of Negro harmony.”

The correct title of the piece is “Castle House Rag.” Someone at Victor got the title mixed up with another James Reese Europe composition, punningly titled “Castles in Europe (The Innovation Trot),” which had been both published and registered for copyright on the very same days as “Castle House Rag.” Victor had apparently received copies of both for consideration to record and the title mix-up occurred.

“Castle House Rag” is a multi-themed work with sparse and subtle use of syncopation. But the effect that it has in this recorded performance is electrifying due to the unabashed energy exhibited and a quasi-improvisational manner in which the musicians play.

The recorded performance belies the daunting nature of the written work—two or more violins attack the dense melody with muscular vigor, maintaining, almost perfectly, the challenging tempo of 118 beats-per-minute in cut-time. The drummer, Buddy Gilmore, accompanies with aggressively-played rudiments. Also, there are two piano players, on one piano, perhaps an attempt to replicate the density of Europe’s ten-piano symphony orchestra. The two keyboardists provide a very dense foundation, and—due to the restraints of acoustical recording—a delightful air of chaos!

A published “stock” orchestration of “Castle House Rag” mirrors the basic recorded performance for the first three strains only, for the recording goes into an area of traditional dance music that the orchestrator, Carl F. Williams, perhaps dared not commit to paper. The fourth and fifth strains, or sections, of the recording reconstructs and old-time square or round dance, such as the Virginia Reel, where couples interacted with other couples. The fourth strain is a simple plantation-era passage, reminiscent of “Shortenin’ Bread.” The fifth strain is an out-and-out barn dance figure, featuring a continuously repeated three-note motif, known as “secondary rag,” where emphasis constantly shifts, creating a feeling of three against two. But the remarkable thing is the way it is played. The energy put forth is that of a classic country and bluegrass performance. There was nothing else like this on record at the time—essentially “country ragtime” played on a violin, in an authentic-sounding style, and by a classically-trained, New York-based, black violinist! Again, the published score has none of this.

Once the “barn dance” excitement ends, there is a sixteen-measure “stop chorus” featuring drummer Buddy Gilmore. Gilmore, one of the stars of the Europe ensemble, goes into an exciting cascade of sixteenth notes, throwing accents hither and yon. It has been suggested that he was imitating the Castles here, but I believe the rapidity of Gilmore’s beats is simply not in the Castle’s style. I feel that it may signify the most-driven and inspired slave dancing, recalled from pre-bellum days.

Europe left the employ of the Castles shortly thereafter under cloudy circumstances. He did, however, remain on good terms with them. This, in turn, led the Victor company to replace

Europe with the newly-formed “Castle House Orchestra.” Europe did not record again until 1919, shortly before his tragic and untimely death that same year.

David Sager works in the Recorded Sound Research Center of the Library of Congress. He is also known as a classic jazz trombonist and jazz historian. David has been twice nominated for Grammy awards for his album notes to historical reissues.