# Big House

## Ruisi Quartet

HAYON · LOCKY · LEITH

## BIG HOUSE

**Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)**

**String Quartet No. 11 in D Minor, Op. 9, No. 4**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | I. Moderato | 06. 48 |
| 2 | II. Menuetto - Trio | 04. 34 |
| 3 | III. Adagio cantabile | 05. 00 |
| 4 | IV. Finale. Presto | 03. 55 |

**Matthew Locke (c. 1621-1677)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 | **Fantasie in F** | 04. 15 |

**Oliver Leith (b. 1990)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 6 | **A different *Fantasie from Suite No. 5 in G minor*** | 05. 02 |

**The Big House**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 7 | I. Big House | 04. 22 |
| 8 | II. Blue bottles | 03. 33 |
| 9 | III. Sunshine choir | 06. 02 |
| 10 | IV. Cornicing | 02. 22 |
| 11 | V. Home chapel organ | 04. 43 |
| 12 | VI. Pomegranate | 04. 45 |
| 13 | VII. Fish eggs and wine | 03. 51 |

**Joseph Haydn**

**String Quartet No. 23 in F Minor, Op. 20, No. 5**

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|---|---|---|
| 14 | I. Allegro moderato | 09. 21 |
| 15 | II. Menuetto - Trio | 05. 09 |
| 16 | III. Adagio | 05. 50 |
| 17 | IV. Finale. Fuga a due soggetti | 03. 07 |

Total playing time: 82.46

**Ruisi Quartet**:

**Alessandro Ruisi**, violin I
**Oliver Cave**, violin II
**Luba Tunnicliffe**, viola
**Max Ruisi**, cello

Matthew Locke, Joseph Haydn and Oliver Leith, sitting at a bar.

There isn't a punchline but it's quite funny to think about.

There are no clever connections between this unlikely trio, and hearing their music sit side by side magnifies the centuries that separate them. But if they represent different musical planets, there is a sense they orbit around the same familiar yet subversive centre; Haydn making and breaking all the rules, Oliver organising sounds as sweet and heartbreaking as a Classical slow movement but slippy and smudged around the edges. A 17th Century Fantasia turning in unexpected directions on a familiar route, connecting the harmonious and dissonant relationship between past, present and future.

It feels as though Haydn's music is the foundation upon which our quartet is built. His writing is instantly engaging, dramatic and vividly characterised; a movement of Haydn can feel like a riddle to be solved, something to be interacted with. In performance his works provide us with opportunities to explore, to be spontaneous, and to connect — with the music, with the audience and with one another. That same spirit of exploration and invention was vital when approaching our new commission from Oliver Leith. Although Oliver is a composer we have nurtured a close relationship with over the last few years, we had little idea where the piece would take us when we began work on The Big House. The journey through new techniques, colourful and cryptic performance directions and unusual tunings pushed us in new ways. Yet, his light touch with written directives gave us freedom to experiment and space for individuality — reminiscent of our approach with Haydn and Locke.

Recording a debut album as a string quartet can feel like a big deal, but it's also just a snapshot of a moment in time. We feel like there isn't a well defined sense of our musical present, but rather a melting pot of almost limitless diversity in compositional style and cultural influence. Our intention is to distil a small and very personal part of this chaos onto the record.

**Ruisi Quartet**

*I came on a great house in the middle of the night,*
*Its open lighted doorway and its windows all alight,*
*And all my friends were there and made me welcome too;*
*But I woke in an old ruin that the winds howled through;*
*And when I pay attention I must out and walk*
*Among the dogs and horses that understand my talk,*
*O what of that, O what of that,*
*What is there left to say?*

*The Curse of Cromwell*
W. B. Yeats

What's the word for a person who takes on the character of a building? A form of zoomorphism, except in architecture — what's the word for it? And what about music that does the same?

Let's start with the brooding, craggy grandeur of W.B. Yeats, a poet who came to embody the crumbling romance of the tower in Galway where he wrote some of his most rugged work. Yeats was a member of the Anglo-Irish upper crust, and for all the swoop and lyricism of his verse, the moths seemed to nibble at his tweed sleeves in real time. Lines of Yeats are quoted by the photographer Simon Marsden, whose collection *In Ruins* brings together images of great homes of Ireland — or rather, images of the eerie wrecks of them. Marsden photographed stately piles which had been built for the nation's aristocracy and since left rotting, burned and abandoned. They are toothy relics of famine, civil war, emigration and shifting cultural power, their roofs collapsed, their walls slouching under lichen and ivy. What used to be grand is now ghostly. Yeats's convivial welcome, those "lighted doorways and windows all alight" — all the bright nostalgia haunts these places still, but now the remnants of wealth and well-fed appetites subside under damp and the padding about of dogs and horses.

Marsden's book was a starting point for Oliver Leith's string quartet **Big House** (2020). The upheaval of Irish political history has personal resonance: Leith's parents arrived in England in the 1980s having left Belfast in the thick of the Troubles but had hardly forgotten the legacy of those houses, what fed them and who ransacked them. There were no sentimental illusions about Ireland in the Leith household, and yet there was yearning, a lingering taste for the music and the soft air with its moss and memories.

The movement titles in Big House are not literal — this is no sonic blueprint of Marsden's ruins. Instead, the words have a texture. They feel like the music. The music takes on the character of those slumping, once-grand buildings. Leith's Blue Bottles buzz their last. We can feel the fibrousness of their little legs, the dying fizzle of their hectic energy. Sunshine Choir is all shafts of light through mucky windows, dust molecules riding the drafts. Listen carefully and you can hear each bow-stroke, each horse-hair meeting string, each breath being drawn to prepare it as though the musicians have become those rough beasts of Yeats mythology. In Cornicing, egg-and-dart plaster melts and slithers. In Chapel Organ, the bellows wheeze away resolutely. Pomegranates are ripe, squirty and potent. Fish eggs have a squeak and a sheen.

There is a defiant ordinariness in the imagery and language Leith uses in his score. Instructions to his performers at the top of the piece: 'Big, guts, grand'. A horse neighs (via the viola) in the fourth bar. Other indications include: 'fat fat sound', 'get sloppier', 'with the charm of a children's orchestra, but played on an organ', 'a little pathetic and dizzy'. In Cornicing, Leith confides to his players: "for some reason I was thinking about riding on a horse à la wild west, I'm not sure if that is helpful". In Pomegranate ('shiny, wet') he suggests: "like your foot on the gas of an old car, rum rum rev rev, that sound, very light though".

Big House was commissioned by the Ruisi Quartet, whose founding brothers Alessandro and Max have known Leith since he and Max studied together at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. ("Max and I went to similar parties," says Leith. "We both tried to affect a stupid distain for hard work, which neither of us has been able to keep up.") For the Ruisi members, working with Leith has been mainly about getting the atmosphere right. The notes on the page can appear deceptively simple, as Alessandro puts it, so the trick, he says, is accessing the right tone, the right sort of suggestion. "Olly would tell us: it needs to be lazier. He'd tell us: it needs to be looser. His music is cheeky but I also find it incredibly melancholic and fond. And there's, well, a *yearning*."

That yearning, that fondness, that cheek. One central attribute of Leith's music is how it allows potentially contradictory elements to sit together, all of them sincere at the same time, nothing sending up or cancelling out the rest. Parody, kitsch, comedy, heart, high, low, ordinary, simple, heightened, *beauty* — it's all in there, in a muddle that doesn't need to be resolved because it is profoundly human. And so in Big House. Yes, the uptipping of class and convention appeals to Leith as a gleeful champion of the left and the low-fi, but so too does craft, precision and elegance. Another recurring feature of his works: tactility and the sensorial allure of textural decay — "a thing that you can see being done to a material," is how he words it. "A way of tracking a change." Leith's music typically involves blurry visions, hazy horizons, the warped wonder of everyday objects made to shine and shimmer. He admits to being obsessed with repetition. He lingers on realness, rawness, scruffiness, roughness — and also on refinement, on sounds and gestures that are *just so*. As Simon Marsden notes: "There is such a beauty in ruins, such a stillness, and magic for the imagination."

In **A different Fantasie from Suite No.5 in G minor** (2020), Leith looks back to the English baroque composer Matthew Locke,

a Catholic trained in the Low Countries and well-placed to make himself useful under the restoration monarch Charles II. As well as choral works, Locke wrote achingly expressive suites for consorts of viols and/or recorders, often including a movement in the free-flowing form of a **Fantasie**. Leith says he loves how blank Locke's notation is, that there's an alchemic magic in sculpting his sounds out of silence. Contemplating Locke's music prompted basic compositional questions of his own: "What are phrases? What are dynamics? Imagine playing this on an ancient instrument with no dynamic capabilities — how might new shapes emerge?" Replaying snatches of Locke on loop, turning the phrases over and over, his own Different Fantasie emerged — the essential gestures remained, but now the details had slipped and slithered.

This disc was recorded as the world was in lockdown during the second year of the Coronavirus pandemic. The four musicians of the Ruisi Quartet had formed a bubble of sorts: two are brothers, two are a couple, one is an old friend, and they stuck together and kept making music. After ten years together as a group, they could never have planned to make their debut album under such intense circumstances — the recording sessions took place in a deserted Snape Maltings, and the eeriness and emptiness is palpable in the resonant spaces around every note. Yet somehow it's exactly right for musicians who have always been drawn to introspection, to bareness, to an up-close feeling of breath on skin. They joke about being an 'emo' quartet because their vibe is generally slow and sad. A 'heaviness and a depth', says Alessandro when asked to define their approach. 'A sound that draws you in rather than anything demonstrative.' In concerts they don't do encores and never finish with a banger. Their aim, he says, is just to get "to the core of a feeling."

Between 1769 and 1792, Joseph Haydn wrote three sets of six quartets — Opus 9, Opus 17 and Opus 20 — 18 miraculous quartets in

the space of three short years, transforming the genre as he went. The **Opus 20** set was designed as an interlinked whole and the cover of an early printed edition featured an illustration of a sun. For the musicologist Donald Tovey, Opus 20 was "a sunrise over the domain" of string quartets, and No. 5 in F minor is the crown of the bunch: outer movements nervy, impatient and volatile, trading dark and light with gripping urgency, with the showstopper of an Adagio in between – graceful, songful and simple.

**Opus 9 No. 4** was the first quartet Haydn wrote in a minor key, and for his musicians and listeners a minor key meant depth, turmoil and soul-scouring intensity. The opening leans into its sweet-sore chords as if pressing on a bruise. Without vibrato (the Ruisi quartet does not play with specific period techniques but does assume historically-informed practice as part of their vocabulary) these chords are sharper and somehow more delicious on each iteration. In the last movement Haydn deals in sighs, febrile dynamics and tightly-sprung counterpoint. The minuet is restless and questioning, a stately dance of furtive elegance. The trio eases into a major-key violin duet, suddenly light-filled with the first violin playing in rosy double stops.

Why wait ten years to make a debut album? The Ruisis admit they were reticent to take to the studio. They stress they are fundamentally a live quartet — "we appreciate the ephemerality and spontaneity of performance" — and say they were nervous about the fixed-downness of recording. "Especially when it comes to playing the music of Haydn," says Alessandro. "We worried it would be like meeting up with friends and planning too much in advance about what you're going to say." And so they didn't. Didn't plan, didn't script. As the pandemic raged outside, they shut the doors of Snape and opened their instrument cases.

**Kate Molleson**




## Acknowledgements

**PRODUCTION TEAM**
Executive producer **Alessandro Ruisi**, **Oliver Cave**, **Luba Tunnicliffe**, **Max Ruisi** (Ruisi Quartet) **& Renaud Loranger** (Pentatone)
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Oliver Leith, The Big House © 2021 Faber Music
Oliver Leith, A different Fantasie from Suite No. 5 in G minor © 2021 Faber Music



Haydn editions used for this recording:
String Quartet in D Minor Op. 9 No. 4 - Clementi
String Quartet in F Minor Op. 20 No. 5 - Artaria

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