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# Pierre Boulez

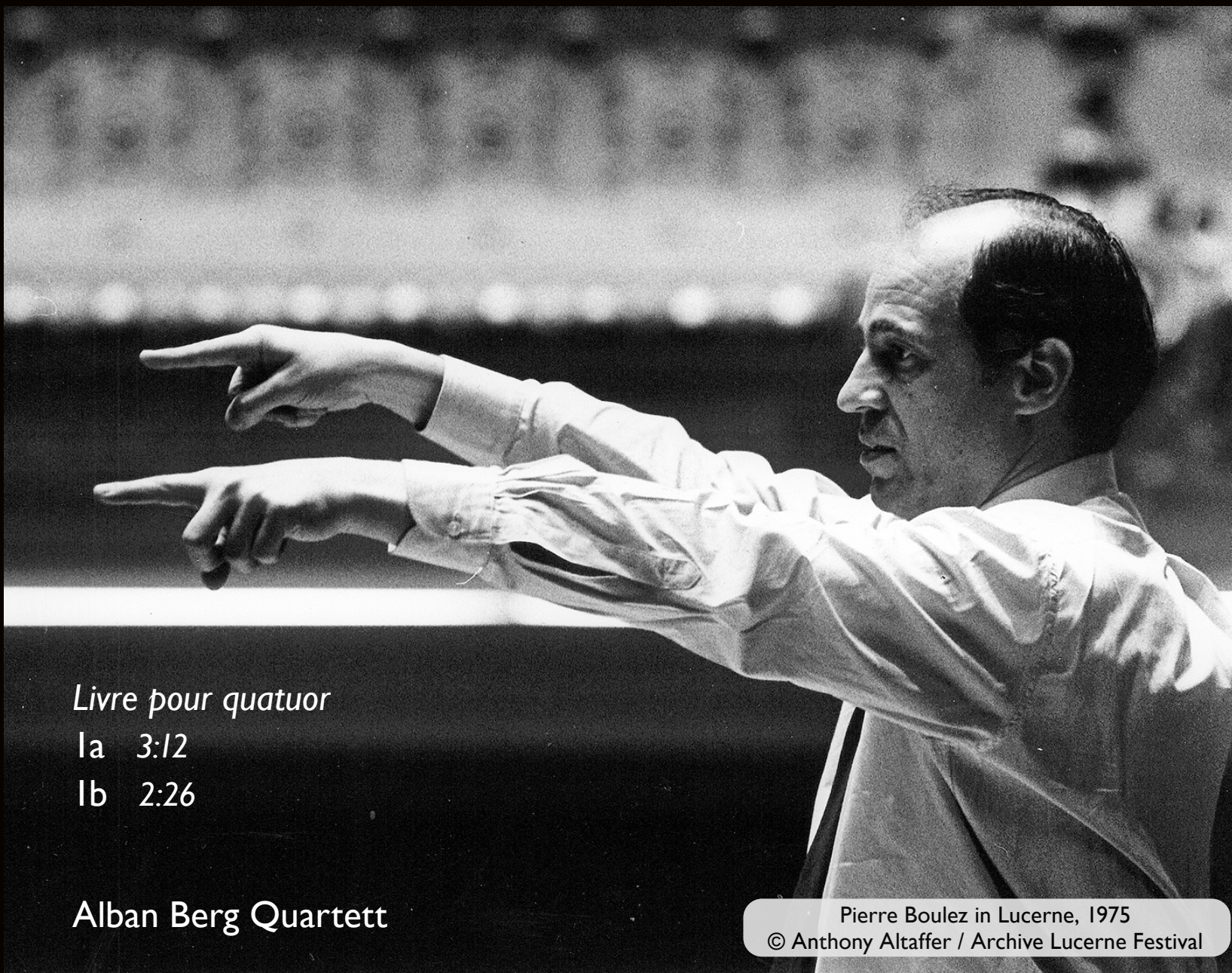
*Livre pour quatuor, Ia & Ib*

Alban Berg Quartett



# Pierre Boulez

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*Livre pour quatuor*

Ia 3:12

Ib 2:26

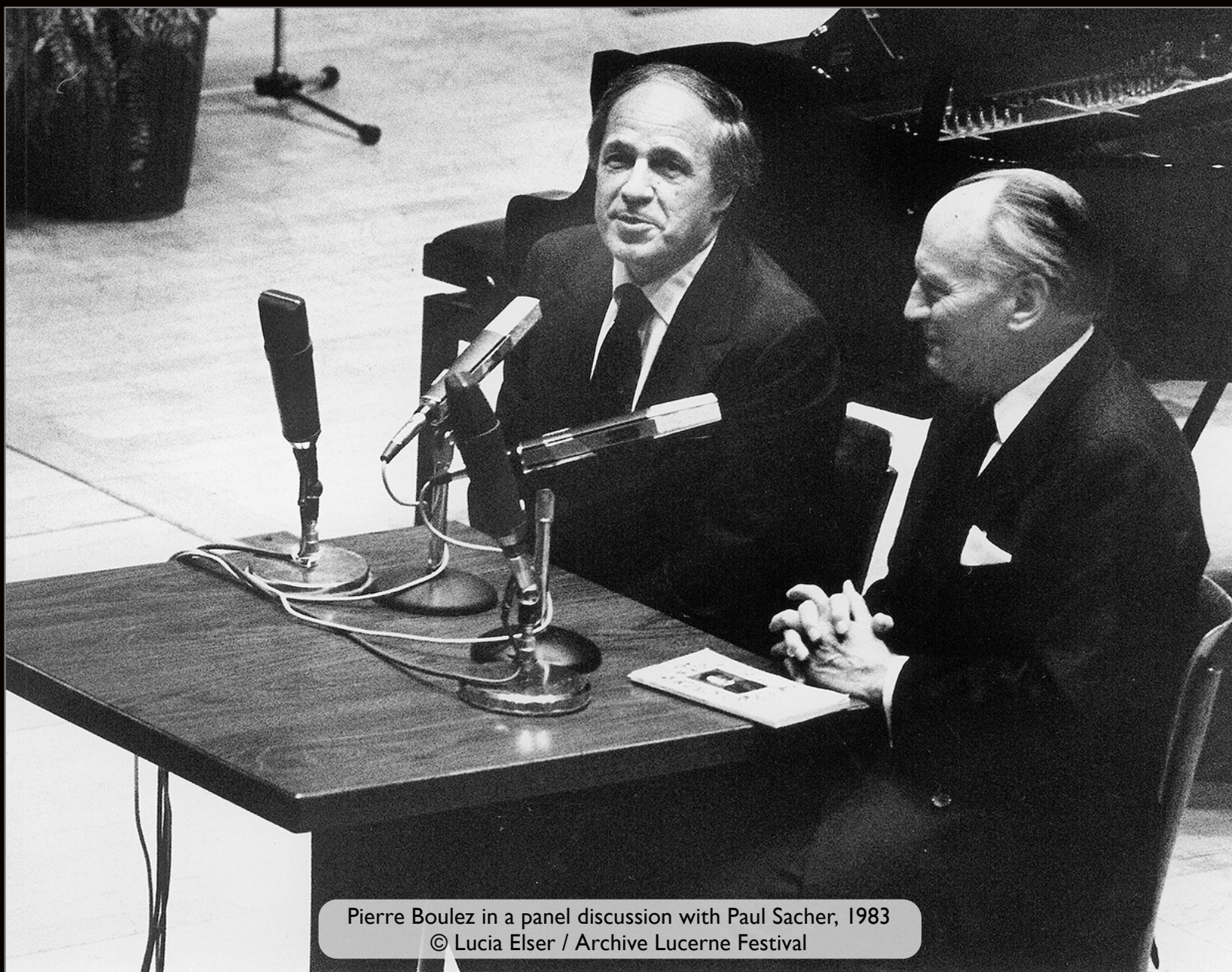
Alban Berg Quartett

Pierre Boulez in Lucerne, 1975  
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# Pierre Boulez

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Pierre Boulez in a panel discussion with Paul Sacher, 1983  
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## **‘That Sonority Does Not Exist in France’**

### **The Alban Berg Quartet Performs Pierre Boulez’s *Livre pour quatuor***

**At first glance, it seems an unlikely combination: the legendary Alban Berg Quartet performing Pierre Boulez’s *Livre pour quatuor* – and indeed making its Lucerne Festival debut with this highly complex serial score, which Boulez refined throughout the course of his life. Yet that is precisely what happened.**

When we look back at the history of Lucerne Festival, Boulez first appeared in his role as a conductor. In September 1975, he led the New York Philharmonic, of which he was at the time music director, in two performances as part of a European tour during what then was known as the Internationale Musikfestwochen (Lucerne Festival’s former name). It was only eight years later, on 5 September 1983, that he was introduced to Lucerne audiences as a composer – in a concert in the Musica nova series. The program opened with Aurèle Nicolet and Jürg Wyttenbach performing his *Sonatine* for flute and piano and concluded with his Third Piano Sonata. In between, the Alban Berg Quartet played Parts Ia and Ib of *Livre pour quatuor* – giving an expressive, vividly shaped performance that had a silvery-warm timbre. Boulez himself was in the audience and joined his friend Paul Sacher, a major patron of contemporary music, for a discussion onstage.

Despite the vast literature on Boulez, this partial performance of *Livre* seems to have gone largely unnoticed – likely because it was the only time that the then-standard-setting Alban Berg Quartet played from the work. (The premiere of the first sections of *Livre* by the Marschner Quartet had taken place almost 30 years previously.) Günter Pichler, the Alban Berg Quartet’s former first violinist, recalls the circumstances that led to this extraordinary concert event.

*We were still a young quartet – it must have been 1976, a year before Boulez launched his ‘Passage du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle’ cycle in Paris – when we played a concert in Baden-Baden that was being recorded for broadcast. The program included Alban Berg’s String Quartet, Op. 3. We were terribly nervous, literally fighting for our lives, and it’s possible that some ‘mishaps’ occurred. After the concert, Boulez appeared and said he had completely forgotten what a fantastic piece Berg’s Opus 3 was. ‘And you played it magnificently. I’ve been thinking of inviting you to Paris to introduce the quartets of the so-called Second Viennese School to the audience there.’ He was referring to the aforementioned ‘Passage du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle’ cycle, in which musicians such as Daniel Barenboim and Pinchas Zukerman also appeared – quite an illustrious lineup. At the end of our meeting, Boulez turned to Nicholas Snowman,*

*his former right-hand man, and told him he should organise masterclasses with us in France, because ‘cette sonorité n’existe pas en France’ [‘this sonority does not exist in France’]. When Snowman later became director of London’s Southbank Centre, Boulez instructed him to engage us for 20th-century quartets – and to pay us full fees (the hall would be half-empty, he added, ‘but that will change’), including flights and accommodation in the best nearby hotel. Which turned out to be The Savoy...*

*After this, we remained in sporadic contact with Boulez. He later even gave a lecture at the Queen Elizabeth Hall when we performed there. Eventually, a request arrived – not from Boulez himself, but directly from Lucerne Festival – to perform a portion of Livre in Lucerne, which would mark our debut at the festival. We got hold of the sheet music, prepared it for performance, and studied the two short movements. Such tailor-made preparation was necessary to avoid page turns, which would have been impossible with this music, which in every respect is extremely difficult to play. We made an incredible effort, even using colour-coded markings to achieve the highest possible precision. The notation – especially the tempo indications – is nearly impossible to execute with absolute precision.*

*We didn’t meet Boulez in Lucerne until the morning of the concert and played for him. I told him that, despite all our efforts, not everything could be rendered with complete exactitude. He agreed, explaining that although he had meticulously noted metronome markings, for example, it was like trying to swim without water. He was pleased with our performance. However, I distinctly remember that at one point, when I played a double harmonic, he suddenly stopped me to remark: ‘Günter, that is not a D, but an F’. Just one of many indications of his phenomenal ear.*

*After the Lucerne performance, we put Livre pour quatuor aside (as did Boulez himself, for that matter), despite the immense effort it had required. That is why I am so happy that a recording of our one-time-only performance has survived. And I am surprised – as often happens when listening back to one’s own performances – that it sounds much better to me now than it did at the time. These few minutes resonate more deeply with me today than they did back then. So I am thrilled indeed that this unique event is being made accessible again for Pierre Boulez’s 100th birthday.*

Recorded by Erich Singer

About the Author: Erich Singer was closely associated with Lucerne Festival from 1971 to 2006, serving as director of the artistic office, editor, and dramaturg. From 1980 to 1991, he represented the Alban Berg Quartet in Switzerland as a concert agent, which led to a lifelong friendship with Günter Pichler.



# Pierre Boulez

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The Alban Berg Quartet makes its debut in Lucerne, 1983  
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# Pierre Boulez



Pierre Boulez in Lucerne, 1975  
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*recordings:* live recordings at LUCERNE FESTIVAL  
(Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)



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*recording dates:* September 5, 1983  
*recording location:* Kunsthau, Lucerne

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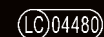
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