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Vladimir Barsky

**The Modern Philidor
Defence**

Chess Stars

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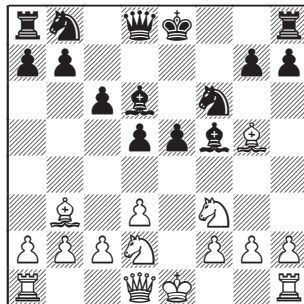
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PREFACE

I decided to make a list of the grandmasters having included the Philidor Defence in their opening repertoire when I began my work with this monograph. I gave up that idea almost instantly, because I understood that I have literally to copy the names of almost the entire database! So, see just some of the players: Alexander Morozevich, Levon Aronian, Vasily Ivanchuk, Alexander Grischuk, Teimur Rajabov, Viorel Bologan, Pavel Elianov, Etienne Bacrot, Baadur Jobava, Zurab Azmaiparashvili, Maxim Vachier Lagrave, Shakhryar Mamedyarov, Ernesto Inarkiev, Vladimir Malanjuk, Dmitry Bocharov, Christian Bauer and many many others. It looks like a contemporary competitive player cannot make an all-purpose repertoire without this opening, just like a beautiful lady, with an intense social life, must have a nice Black evening dress in her wardrobe....

Francois Andre Philidor published back in the year 1749 his great work “Analysis of the Game of Chess” and there he shared with the readers some almost revolutionary concepts for that time, concerning strategical problems in chess: “My intention is to offer to the public something new. I have in mind the role of the pawns. They are the very spirit of chess, they are at the base of attack and defence and their handling is crucial for the outcome of the game. A player, who has no stimulus to play with pawns (even if he can do that well) is like an army general who has tremendous experience, but is not familiar with the theory of war”.

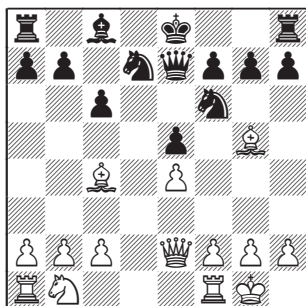
It is well-known that the essence of Philidor’s famous book, having had more than a hundred re-publishings, is the great number of instructive exemplary games, composed by the author and commented thoroughly by him. See the beginning of one of them: **1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♙c4 f5 4.d3 c6 5.exf5 ♙xf5 6.♙g5 ♘f6 7.♗bd2 d5 8.♙b3 ♙d6**



Black has obtained a position, he could have only dreamed about! It is not amazing that the new method of playing in the opening (“Pawns in front and pieces behind!”) attracted immediately many followers. In fact, Philidor himself was a very pragmatic player and he wrote prudently “This game was not quite correct, but Black’s play in the opening was very good, particularly after he obtained an advantage.”.

Unfortunately, the records of only 78 games played by Philidor have survived until today. He began in the normal fashion only 14 of them, while in the rest he was playing with handicap. That was because at that time nobody could create any serious problems for the great French player in the opening, or in the other parts of the game. It is evident that GM Bent Larsen was quite right asserting that “According to his understanding of the game of chess, Philidor was ahead of his contemporaries by decades.”

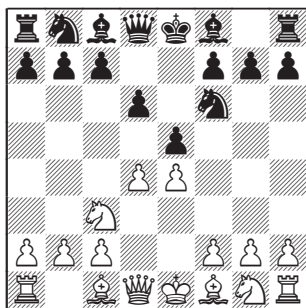
Still, time was running by and his chess ancestors managed to solve some of the puzzles of the great French genius. First of all, it had become clear that instead of 3.♘c4, it was much stronger for White to play **3.d4!**, creating immediate tension in the centre. It is also worth mentioning that in a period of more than two centuries (!) there were brave enough players, who even in that tremendously dangerous situation for Black tried to follow Philidor’s plan with 3...f5. Nowadays, the computer programmes have given a final verdict of this line and it is – Black cannot play like that at all...There were times when Henema’s plan was popular – **3...♖d7 4.♘c4 c6**, but then it was established that White would obtain a stable advantage after **5.0-0 ♗e7 6.dxe5 dxe5 7.♗g5! ♗xg5 8.♞h5 ♞e7 9.♗xg5 ♖gf6 10.♞e2**



It is possible that Black may hold this position after all, but its defence is a very difficult task, since he has no compensation for White’s bishop-pair and he can hardly ever win it. It may sound like a joke, but

when Ilf and Petroff described the legendary simultaneous display in Vasjukah on June 22nd 1927, mentioning “...the outdated, but quite reliable Philidor Defence...”, it turned out that they were very close to the truth...This defence acquired for a long time the reputation of a solid, but tremendously passive opening. See a really expert opinion on the theme of **1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d6**: “Nowadays it is rarely used by top players, but not because of some forced refutation. The reason is that the pawn structures after 2...a6 are relatively not very promising for Black. White has precise ways of getting a better (even if sometimes only slightly better) position without real counterchances for the opponent”. (A.Khalifman “Opening for White According to Anand, volume 1).

The situation began to turn into Black’s favour after some creative minds invented the rather original move-order: **1.e4 d6 2.d4 ♘f6 3.♘c3 e5!?**



Now, White has a choice – whether to enter an endgame after **4.dxe5 dxe5 5.♙xd8+ ♖xd8**, or to obtain a basic position from the Philidor defence – **4.♘f3 ♘bd7**, having given up the hope of obtaining effortlessly the two-bishop advantage. Contemporary tournament practice has indicated that in both cases there arise quite original and complicated positions. White can occupy more space, but after the natural developing moves he must solve the problem what to do later? Black is keeping his pieces behind his pawns, preserving his pawn-structure intact and waits for the opportune moment to inflict a counter strike in the centre, or on the queenside. There has happened numerous times that White, caught napping under the impression that his opponent was doing nothing dangerous, began some hasty operations and realized the danger only after it had become too late for counter measures!

The modern Philidor Defence is a very solid and strategically rich opening, in which there arise various pawn-structures. Some of them are typical for other entirely different openings like the Sicilian Defence, the Ruy Lopez and even the King's Indian Defence. I hope that the Philidor Defence will become a reliable weapon for you against aggressive players who begin the game with a move with their king's pawn. After the contemporary move-order it is practically impossible to avoid this opening, moreover that in our book we deal thoroughly with all possible attempts by White to avoid the main lines as early as on move three!

The Philidor Defence is not so difficult to learn and there are not many forced lines. The book consists of seven chapters, devoted to different move-orders. Each chapter comprises of a "Quick Repertoire", thoroughly analyzed theoretical lines in the part "Step by Step" and "Complete Games". At the beginning, it would be sufficient for you to have a look at the surveys and to see the games and that would not take too much of your time. After that you can test bravely the new opening in short games at your club, or on the Internet. After you have played about 10-15 games in the Philidor Defence, have a look at the part "Step by Step" and compare your play with the recommendations of the author. It may be possible that you would like to introduce corrections in a part of your actions.

Some masters and grandmasters have embraced the Philidor Defence as their basic opening weapon against 1.e4 and you may decide to do the same. White players, as a rule, leave the studying of this opening aside, because they have too many urgent problems to solve in the other open and semi-open theoretical lines. Meanwhile, the Modern Philidor Defence is a serious opening with numerous concrete lines and if White plays only according to "common sense" his chances of obtaining an advantage are closer to nil. In case White players overlook the critical moments and go too far in their ambition to obtain an advantage, they may face difficulties rather quickly.

Finally, I would like to thank IM Maria Fomynikh and GM Alexander Morozovich for their valuable advices, which have helped me tremendously in my work with this book.

*Vladimir Barsky
Moscow, May 2010*