Understanding the QGA

A Black Repertoire with 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4

Alexander Delchev
Semko Semkov

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Understanding the QGA

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Contents

Foreword by the Publisher 5
Introduction 6

Part 1. 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e4 9
1. 3.e4 ♘c6 10
2. The QGA à la Chigorin 37
3. 3.e4 b5?! 51

Part 2. The Classical System 63
4. The Exchange Variation 64
5. The 7.♗b3 Variation 87
6. The 7.♗d3 Variation 97
7. The Old Main Line 107
8. The 7.a4 Variation 121
9. The 7.b3 Variation 143
10. The 7.e4 Variation 149
11. The Furman Variation 155

Part 3. Deviations From The Classical System 163
12. The Gambit Line 164
13. 4.♕a4+ 175
14. Rare Variations 181

Part 4. Alternative Repertoires 185
15. 3.e3 186
16. The 4...♗g4 Variation 201
17. 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.♘f3 a6 219

Ods and Ends 227
18. 1.d4 d5 without 2.c4 228

Index of Variations

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Foreword by the Publisher

Is the King's Indian better than the Nimzo? And what about the Benko?! My mailbox is full with such questions and I always try to explain that the choice of opening repertoire should depend on the player's tastes and needs. For instance, I think that 1.♘f3 would be a bad move for a beginner. Open games with empty or mobile pawn centres put the accent on piece play. They demand detailed calculation and help refining endgame technique.

The QGA is in the same category. It is an excellent opening if you want to learn to play chess better. The overwhelming majority of games is decided in deep middlegame or endgame. The complexity of theory is not even close to mammoth openings as the KID or the Grünfeld where one need several volumes – and the corresponding memory!
At the same time, modern QGA is positionally sound and reliable opening, played by world champions Kasparov, Karpov, Anand, Topalov. Its only drawback is that White could choose ultra solid drawing lines.

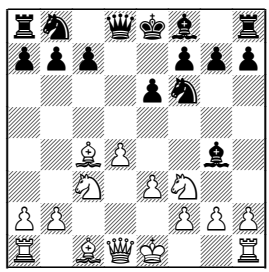
I solved this problem by inviting GM Delchev to share his personal repertoire which includes the sharp and challenging Alekhine Variation based on ...♗g4. That allowed us to present a multifaceted approach with a wide choice for Black ranging from the blunt drawish line 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.♘f3 a6!? 4.e3 b5 to the pawn sacrifice 3...♘f6 4.e3 ♗g4 – without ...a6!

It so happens that I have been studying the QGA all my life. That made our collaboration with Delchev an easy task and resulted in our third mutual work after *The Most Flexible Sicilian* and *The Safest Sicilian*.

Semko Semko
August 2015

Introduction

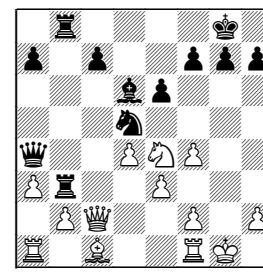
In 2009 during a teamwork with GM Artur Kogan, he briefly showed me the line 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 ♗g4, together with his analysed games. I found it promising and attempted to build up a complete repertoire. It turned out, however, that I faced a serious problem as early as on move 6. After 5.♗xc4 e6 6.♘c3!,



White was threatening to capture our bishop with h3, g4, ♘e5. Artur claimed that best was 6...♘bd7, but then 8.0-0! ♗d6 9.h3 ♗h5 10.e4 e5 11.g4! was well known and definitely unpleasant. I tried to improve with 9...♗xf3 against Swiercz, but got an extremely murky position. It became clear that it was a dead end. 6...a6 7.h3 ♗h5 8.g4 ♗g6 9.♘e5 was not appealing either.

Thus by the natural method of exclusion I reached to the idea of 6... ♘c6. I found in the database a game of Spassky of 1961 where he met the critical 7.♗b5 by the weak 7...♗b4?!. Only a quarter of century later did Black come with an improvement:

Kinsman-Brynell, 1988, saw 7.♗b5 ♗d6 8.e4 ♘d7 9.♗e3 0-0 10.0-0 ♘b6 11.♗e2 f5 and Gausel-Brynell, 1999, introduced the pawn sacrifice 7.h3 ♗h5 8.♗b5 ♗d6 9.♕a4 ♗xf3 10.gxf3 0-0. On the ground of these games, I developed the main directions and managed to build a detailed repertoire. My pupils were satisfied with the new weapon and soon I also had a chance to test it against GM Edouard (an ardent QGA protagonist himself!) – see the annotated **game 34** Edouard-Delchev, Linares 2013.



My compensation for the pawn is obvious and it grew up in a rout: 18...♘xf4 19.♘c3 ♘h3+ 20.♔g2 ♕c4 21.f4 g5 22.♕d1 ♖xb2+ 23.♗xb2 ♖xb2+ 24.♔xh3 ♕xc3 25.♕g4 ♕xe3+ 26.♕g3 ♗xf4 27.♕xe3 ♖xh2+

28.♔g4 h5+ 29.♔f3 ♖h3+ 0-1
The variation got its first taste of gunpowder and the ball was in White's court (it is still there!).

The Classical System with 4...e6 has never really attracted me due to White's possibility to play with a draw in the pocket in the Exchange Variation 7.dxc5. Here is what happened a couple of days ago in Kavala Open, August 9th 2015:

Rychagov 2552-Delchev 2604
1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗xc4 c5 6.0-0 a6 7.dxc5 ♗xc5 8.♕xd8+ ♔xd8 9.♗e2 draw.
When playing opens against 100-150 Elo points lower rated opponents, such a line should be out of question. On the other hand, a solid endgame without risk could be a fair choice against a decent player.

I would not like to impose my tastes so I provide the following alternative repertoires:

The first part of the book is devoted on White's most challenging option against the QGA – **3.e4**. You should learn either:

1. Chapter 1, which deals with 3...♘c6 4.♘f3 ♗g4, or

2. Chapter 2, which is my recommendation. It covers 3...♘c6 4.♘f3 ♘f6!? and offers extremely interesting play à la Chigorin Defence.

I also analyse 3...b5?!, mostly to show Black's problems in that topical line.

If White plays **3.e3**, we have the following choice:

1. 3...♘f6 followed up by the Classical System.

2. 3...e5!? – my recommendation – see Chapter 15.

After **3.♘f3**, we can choose:

1. 3...♘f6 – the Classical System.

2. 3...a6 – with a draw in mind – see Chapter 17.

3. 3...♘f6 4.e3 ♗g4!? which is my weapon of choice in most games.

If you stop your attention on options 2 or 3, you can safely skip the whole part about the Classical System.

Chapter 18 offers advice against Queen's Pawn Openings.

I have written this book in first person, but it is a collaborative work. Every line has been checked and discussed by both authors.

Alexander Delchev
August 2015

Part 1

1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e4

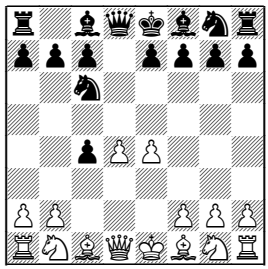
This is the most challenging system against the QGA and the first thing you should learn. Its importance made me offer several alternatives for Black. I recommend 3...♘c6 4.♘f3 ♘f6!? – see Chapter 2. This move order transposes to a very interesting line from the Chigorin Defence. It is strategically unbalanced, but easy to play with Black as he does not have any weaknesses while White's pawn structure is compromised and often overextended. I do not see any theoretical problems so you can use it even against well prepared opponents. Another plus is that the variations are not forced and you will not be risking to face a groundbreaking novelty.

The more conventional 3...♘c6 4.♘f3 ♗g4 is the subject of Chapter 1. I offer reliable defences against everything White has tried so far. However, I also discuss new approaches for White which might give him a pleasant position without much counterplay for Black. Also note that in one line White has a forced draw. On the positive side, we might trick the opponent with the move order, and in the most popular line for White, based on the game Karpov-Milov, we can even get a self-playing attack. So, if you hope to capitalise on your better home preparation, Chapter 1 will give you plenty of advice.

Finally, I pay a tribute to fashion and devote Chapter 3 on the super-topical 3.e4 b5, but mostly in order to discourage you from playing it at a higher level. Black has had his day or two of glory, but I expect murky days for him in future. There are two many lines where his limit is a forced draw. Or a struggle for the draw.

Main Ideas

1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e4 ♘c6!?

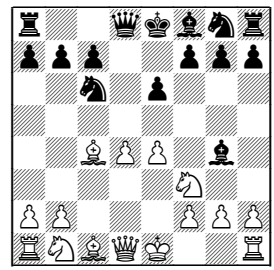


This development is alien to the spirit of the QGA, but it does lead to very complex and strategically unbalanced positions with considerable winning chances... for both sides, to be sure. Instead of unloading the centre, Black hopes to prove that it is overextended. His first goal is to double the f-pawns with ...♗c8-g4xf3 or provoke d4-d5. Then ...e7-e5 would block the centre while ...e7-e6 would try to undermine it.

Theoretical status

It strikes me that all the authors who write on this system seem clearly uncomfortable in White's shoes. Let's consider their recommendations.

• Lars Schandorff gives in his White repertoire book *Playing 1.d4 – The Queen's Gambit* 4.♘f3 ♗g4 **5.♗xc4** e6



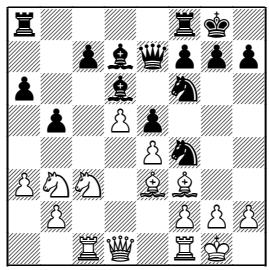
6.♗e3

He offers as a backup line 6.d5 exd5 7.♗xd5 ♕f6 8.♘c3 when 8...♘ge7 9.♗xc6+ ♕xc6 evens the game.

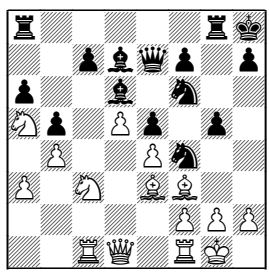
6...♗xf3 7.gxf3 ♕f6 (Black can also transpose to the Chigorin with 7...♘f6!? 8.♘c3 ♗b4 – see Chapter 2). White is in danger, but Schandorff points out that he can still make a draw with 8.♘c3! 0-0-0 9.♕a4 (9.d5 ♗b4) 9...♕xf3 10.♖g1 ♗b4 11.d5 exd5 12.exd5 ♖e8 13.dxc6 ♖xe3+ 14.♔f1 ♗c5 15.♖g3 (15.♖g2∞) 15...♕h1+ 16.♖g1.

As we see, there is nothing to worry about so far.

• Many commentators rely on Karpov's erudition and claim a small advantage for White on the ground of his widely cited game against Milov. It continued 4.♘f3 ♗g4 **5.d5 ♘e5 6.♗f4 ♘g6 7.♗e3** e5 8.♗xc4 a6 9.♘c3 ♘f6 10.0-0 ♗d6 11.♗e2 0-0 12.♘d2 ♗d7 (Keep this bishop! We need it for an attack – see **game 1** Anand-Vallejo Pons, Bilbao 2014.) 13.♖c1 ♕e7 14.a3 b5 15.♘b3 ♘f4 16.♗f3,



when instead of 16...♔h8? which allowed 17.♘a2! (heading for c6), Black should have immediately launched the g-pawn: 16...g5 17.♘a5 ♔h8! 18.b4 ♖g8



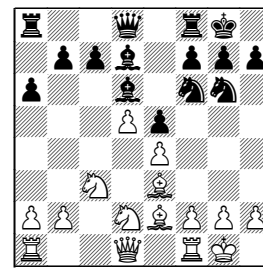
Black is aiming to bring his heavy pieces to the h-file with ...♖8-g6-h6 or ...♕e7-f8-h6 followed by ...♖g8-g5-h4. The key point is that Black can ignore the threat g2-g3xf4 as his threats on the h-file will provide him with adequate compensation. I consider this set-up in **game 5** Miton-Berzinsh, Warsaw 2013 and in **game 4** Olszewski-Mista, Warsaw 2011.

On a final note, I would add that in the first of these two annotated games Black revealed his plan even earlier: 13...♘f4!? to take over the initiative after 14.♗f3? g5 15.♘c4 ♔h8! 16.a3 ♖g8.

The bottom line is that Karpov's stand offers Black a "free" attack. It suffices to put a knight on f4, bolster it with ...g5 and never budge from there (except for eating the white bishop on e2 if it is available).

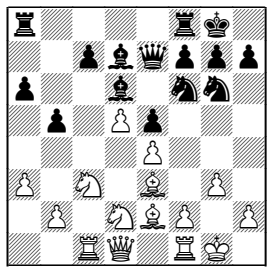
Problems and critical lines

Let's return to the position after 12...♗d7.



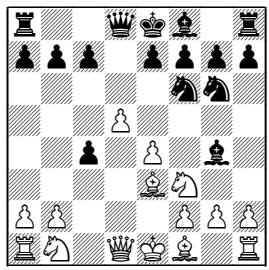
White has the better centre. His pawn on d5 makes the difference on the queenside. The d2-knight can follow the route ♘c4-a5 or ♘b3-c5(a5). The c3-knight could go to a2-b4 or d1-e3. Both bishops on e2 and e3 support the knights' stabs. In short, White's game is playing itself. Black's only counterplay is

based on ...♘f4 followed up by ...g5. If White overcame the spell of Karpov's name and thought logically, he could find the very unpleasant move 13.g3!. It effectively dissipates our hopes for an attack and brings us down to prose. Although this line is practically nexplored, I believe that 13...♕e7 14.♖c1 b5 15.a3! (a new move, which aims to block the queenside and take control of c5) retains some initiative.

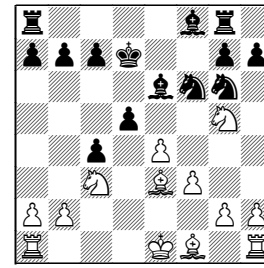


Of course, Black can enter a symmetrical position with 15...c5 16.dxc6 ♗xc6 17.b4! ♖fd8 and gradually exchange most pieces to draw, but I do not like such static positions.

I use another approach to avoid the abovementioned line:
4.♘f3 ♗g4 5.d5 ♘e5 6.♗f4 ♘g6 7.♗e3 **♘f6!?**

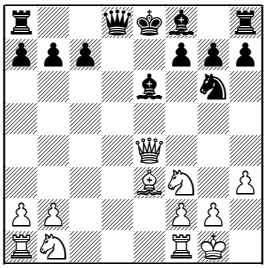


Now **8.♘c3 e6** introduces a totally different approach to the centre. Instead of blocking it, Black destroys it. Critical here is 9.♕a4+ ♕d7 10.♕xd7+ ♔xd7! 11.♘g5! (Karpov again!) 11...exd5 12.♘xf7 ♖g8 13.f3 ♗e6 14.♘g5 ♗b4!



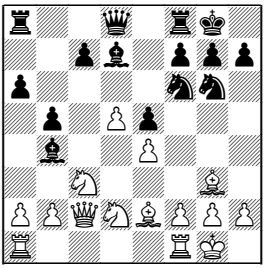
Game 3 Sakaev-Yakovich, Moscow 2009 saw further 15.0-0-0 ♗xc3 16.bxc3 b5 with a tangled and very interesting position. A sterner test of Yakovich's idea, according to my analysis, might be the line 15.♘xe6 ♔xe6 16.exd5+ ♔d6 17.♗xc4 ♖ae8 18.♔d2 with a sharp nontrivial endgame.

The move order with 7...♘f6 is also effective against 8.♘bd2 when 8...e6! is strong.
However, Tomashevsky pinpointed against me in 2013 a downside of Black's seventh move. He sacrificed a pawn by **8.♗xc4!?** when 8...♘xe4 is practically the only decent answer since 8...a6?! 9.♘bd2!? e5? 10.dxe6 would be horrible. After 9.h3 ♗d7 10.0-0, I should have probably forced play with 10...e5! 11.dxe6 ♗xe6 12.♕c2!? ♗xc4 13.♕xe4+ ♗e6 This position also needs practical testing.



For completeness sake, I will also mention the retreat to g3:
4.♘f3 ♗g4 5.d5 ♘e5 6.♗f4 ♘g6 **7.♗g3**. Then 7...e5 is the only move but this version of the static structure should not be a problem for us since White's bishop is badly missing from the g1-a7 diagonal. We can exploit that by advancing pawns on the queenside. Here is an example:

Najer-Vorobiov
Moscow 2002

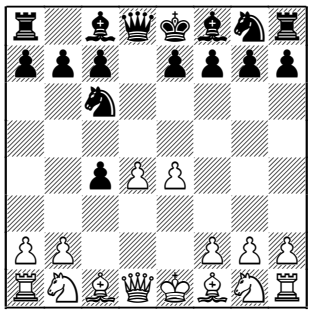


15...c6!=.

In conclusion, 4.♘f3 ♗g4 is playable, but the Chigorin with 4...♘f6 offers much sharper play. I examine it in Chapter 2.

Step by Step

1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e4 ♘c6!?



This development is alien to the spirit of the QGA, but it does lead to very complex and strategically unbalanced positions with considerable winning chances... for both sides, to be sure. Instead of unloading the centre, Black hopes to prove that it is overextended. The first goal is to double the f-pawns with ...♗c8-g4xf3 or provoke d4-d5. Then ...e7-e6xd5 would devalue White's pawn centre and would give us an easy and natural development.

4.♘f3

Of course, White may refrain from 4.♘f3, but 4.♗e3 and 4.d5 (an attempt to sidestep the Chigorin which arises after 4.♘f3 ♘f6) do not pose substantial problems. Let's see:

a) After 4.d5 ♘e5, we can get a good version of the main plan with ...e6. The key point is that we have not played ...♗g4 so we are not to fear ♕a4+ which is the most challenging retort to ...e6 in line A. For instance: 5.♗f4

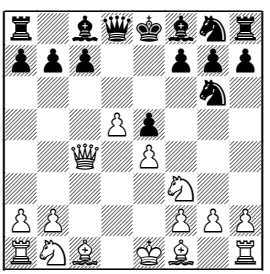
Minor alternatives are:

5.♘f3 ♗g4;

5.f4?! ♘d3+ (5...e6 6.fxe5 ♕h4+ 7.♔d2 ♕f4+ is only a repetition) 6.♗xd3 cxd3 7.♕xd3 c6;

5.♘c3 e6!;

5.♕d4 ♘g6! (do not develop the enemy by 5...♘d3+. He gets an initiative after 6.♗xd3 cxd3 7.♘c3 c6 8.♗f4 ♘f6 9.0-0-0) 6.♘f3 e5 7.♕xc4 (7.♘xe5? drops a piece to 7...♗b4+ 8.♘c3 c5. I encountered once 7.dxe6? ♗xe6 8.♘c3 ♘f6 9.♗g5 when simplest was 9...c6∓.)



White counts on seizing space on the kingside with h2-h4-h5

which could be embarrassing after 7...♘f6. It is better to prepare a retreat on e7 with 7...♗d6. Black took over the initiative in the game Goldin-Morozevich, St Petersburg 1993, following 8.♘c3 ♘f6 9.h4 h6 10.h5 ♘e7 11.♗e3 0-0 12.♗e2 a6 13.♘d2 c6.

5...♘g6 6.♗g3

6.♗e3 ♘f6 7.♘c3 e6! opens the e-file in Black's favour: 8.♗xc4 exd5 9.exd5 ♗d6 10.h3 0-0 11.♘f3 a6 (11...♕e7 12.0-0 ♘e5= Petkov-Godena, Warsaw 2013) 12.0-0 b5 13.♗b3 ♖e8

6...h5!?

It is good to gain space on the kingside before switching to the thematic plan with ...e6.

6...e5 leads to the pawn structure of line A (see below): 7.♗xc4 a6! 8.♘c3 ♗d6 9.♘f3 ♘f6.

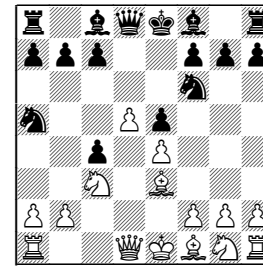
7.h3 h4 8.♗h2 and now 8...e6 9.♗xc4 ♘f6 10.♘c3 exd5 11.♗xd5!? ♗d6=.

b) 4.♗e3 ♘f6 5.♘c3

5.e5 ♗g4 6.♘f3 ♘d5 gives Black comfortable development.

5.f3 does not look inspiring as besides 5...e5 6.d5 ♘d4 7.♗xd4 exd4 8.♕xd4 c6 which offers sufficient compensation for the pawn, Black also has 6...♘a5!? 7.♕a4+ c6 when 8.♗d2 b6 or 8.dxc6 ♘xc6 9.♗xc4 ♗d7 are clearly harmless so White should take the piece and struggle after 8.b4 b5 9.♕xa5 ♕xa5 10.bxa5 cxd5 11.♘c3 d4 12.♘xb5 dxe3 13.♘c7+ ♔d7 14.♘xa8 ♗b4+ 15.♔d1 ♗a6 16.♖c1 ♖c8 17.♘b6+ axb6 18.axb6 ♗d2.

5...e5 6.d5 ♘a5



7.♕a4+

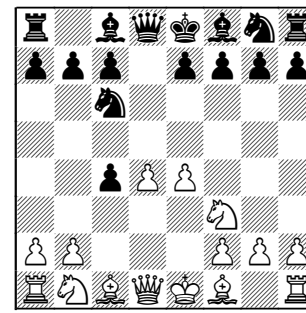
The insertion of 7.♘f3 ♗d6 enables the nice piece sac 8.♕a4+ ♗d7!? 9.♕xa5 a6!! 10.♘a4 ♕e7! with great compensation, for instance: 11.a3 ♘xe4 12.♗xc4 0-0.

7...c6

7...♗d7 is also possible, but not so strong as in the previous example.

8.dxc6 ♘xc6 9.♗xc4 ♗b4 10.♘f3 0-0=.

Let's now return to the most topical line 4.♘f3:



We have three possible approaches here. The most popular one (line A) is to force d4-d5 and block the centre with ...e5. More testing is the plan with ...e7-e6xd5. I consider it

Index of Branches

Part 1. 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e4 9
1. 3.e4 ♘c6 4.♘f3 (4.d5 14; 4.♗e3 15) 4...♗g4 5.d5 (5.♗xc4 16; 5.♗e3 16)
5...♘e5 6.♗f4 (6.♕d4 17; 6.♘bd2 17) 6...♘g6 7.♗g3 17 (7.h3 17)
7.♗e3 e5 (7...♘f6 19) 8.♗xc4
a6 9.♗e2 ♘f6 10.♘c3 ♗d6 11.0-0 0-0 12.♘d2 ♗d7 13.♖c1 22 (13.a3 22)
13.g3 24

2. The QGA à la Chigorin 37
3.e4 ♘c6 4.♘f3 ♘f6 5.♘c3 (5.e5 40; 5.d5 40) 5...♗g4 6.d5 41 (6.♗xc4 41)
6.♗e3 43

3. 3.e4 b5 4.a4 c6 5.axb5 (5.♘c3 55) 5...cxb5 6.♘c3 a6 7.♘xb5 axb5 8.♖xa8
♗b7 9.♖a1 (9.♖a2 56) 9...e6 10.f3 (10.♗e2 57) 10...f5 57 (10...♘c6 57)
10.♘e2 58

Part 2. The Classical System 63
4. The Exchange Variation 64
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗xc4 c5 6.0-0 a6 7.dxc5 ♗xc5 8.♕xd8+ ♔xd8
9.♘bd2 72 (9.b3 71; 9.a3 72)
9.♘e5 ♔e7 10.♗e2 ♘bd7 11.♘c4 77
11.♘d3 77

5. The 7.♗b3 Variation 87
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗xc4 c5 6.0-0 a6 7.♗b3 ♗e7 8.♘c3 91
8.♕e2 92

6. The 7.♗d3 Variation 97
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗xc4 c5 6.0-0 a6 7.♗d3 cxd4 99
7...♘bd7 101

7. The Old Main Line 107
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗xc4 c5 6.0-0 a6 7.♕e2 b5 8.♗b3 (8.♗d3 109) 8...♗b7
9.a4 ♘bd7 109
9...b4 111
9.♖d1 111

8. The 7.a4 Variation 121
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗xc4 c5 6.0-0 a6 7.a4 ♘c6 8.♕e2 (8.♘c3 126)
8...cxd4 9.♖d1 ♗e7 10.exd4 0-0 11.♘c3 ♘d5 12.h4 127
12.♗b3 128
12.♗d2 131
12.♕e4 131
12.♗d3 132
8...♕c7 9.♘c3 ♗d6 10.dxc5 134 (10.b3 134; 10.♗d2 134; 10.h3 134)
10.♖d1 136
7...b6 8.e4 137
8.♕e2 138

9. The 7.b3 Variation 143
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗xc4 c5 6.0-0 a6 7.b3 144 (7.a3 144)

10. The 7.e4 Variation 149
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗xc4 c5 6.0-0 a6 7.e4 b5 150 (7...♘xe4 150)

11. The Furman Variation 155
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗xc4 c5 6.♕e2 a6 157 (6...cxd4 157)

Part 3. Deviations From The Classical System 163
12. The Gambit Line 164
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 a6 5.e4 (5.e3 166; 5.a4 166) 5...b5 6.e5 ♘d5 7.a4 e6 8.axb5
8...♗b4 9.♕c2 167
9.♗d2 168
8...♘b6 170

13. 4.♕a4+ 175
4.♕a4+ ♘c6 5.♘c3 176 (5.e3 176;)
5.♕xc4 ♗e6 176
5...e5 6.dxe5 177
6.♘xe5 177

14. Rare Variations 181
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.g3 181
3.♘c3 182
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘a3 184

Part 4. Alternative Repertoires 185
15. 3.e3 186
3.e3 e5 4.♗xc4 (4.♘f3 189) 4....exd4 5.exd4 ♗d6 6.♘f3 ♘f6 7.0-0 (7.♕e2+

189) 7...0-0 8.♗g5 191
8.h3 192

16. The 4...♗g4 Variation 201
3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3 ♗g4 5.♗xc4 e6
6.♕b3 205
6.h3 ♗h5 7.♕b3 (7.g4 206; 7.♗e2 206; 7.♘c3 207) 7...♗xf3 8.gxf3 c5 9.♕xb7 ♘bd7 10.♘c3 207
10.dxc5 207
6.♘bd2 208
6.0-0 208
6.♘c3 ♘c6 7.0-0 210
7.♗b5 211

17. 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.♘f3 a6 219
3.♘f3 a6 4.e4 221
4.e3 222

Ods and Ends 227
18. 1.d4 d5 without 2.c4 228
1.d4 d5 2.♗f4 ♘f6! 3.e3 e6 230 (3...c5 230)
1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.e3 c5 233
1.d4 d5 2.♗g5 235

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