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Introduction

When I began work on this project, I was concerned that I might not find sufficient games of interest. A couple of years on, it's hard to imagine a more groundless fear! Those I initially selected as main games were often moved into the notes as I worked through the embarrassment of riches that has greeted Pirc devotees in the last few years. That most creative of players, Vassily Ivanchuk, has taken up the Pirc as a weapon of choice when playing for a win with Black against 1 e4, with predictably impressive results. Vladimir Kramnik, who has been known to struggle with White against the Pirc, recently saw the light as well and likewise began to employ our opening in top-level tournaments. The Pirc has another elite champion in Shakhriyar Mamedyarov, while further big names including Alexander Grischuk, Vugar Gashimov, Veselin Topalov, Peter Svidler, Levon Aronian and Vadim Zvjaginsev have dabbled in it occasionally. Thanks to the efforts of such players, as well as of long-term exponents at 'ordinary' grandmaster level, such as Fernando Peralta and Vitaly Tseshkovsky, I can confidently promise readers both pleasure and instruction in the pages of *Chess Developments: The Pirc*.

The Pirc attracts these stars for essentially the same reason that it may be recommended at lower levels. Its theoretical status is currently very respectable (more so now than five years ago when I made a special effort to rehabilitate several lines in my first book on this opening), but this reliability does not come at the price of allowing forced draws or needing to memorize reams of analysis merely in order to ensure survival in certain critical lines. Independent-minded players continue to benefit from this scope for improvisation and innovation in the early stages.

This book provides an up-to-date survey of the Pirc using fifty annotated games, focusing in special depth on several fashionable lines. Unlike an opening such as its thematic cousin the Sicilian Dragon, however, the Pirc doesn't have any main highways in which crucial novelties are introduced every few months or so; instead, black players need to treat a large range of possible replies with equal care

and attention. For this reason, I have covered almost the whole spectrum of the opening in this book, omitting only minor lines that have seen hardly any action in the past five years (such as 4 Bc4, 4 Bf4 and 4 Be2 intending g4 or h4). I frequently provide longer game fragments than is strictly necessary for a theoretical assessment, in order to give readers a full sense of the creative possibilities available. This book is thus primarily a battle manual for modern tournaments, designed both for established Pirc players and for those who are taking up the opening for the first time. Whilst there is much analysis offered for critical study, the usual Notes, Tips, Warnings and Key Development icons will, I hope, make for enjoyable reading.

At the same time, this book updates my comprehensive survey of Pirc theory, *The Pirc in Black and White* (Everyman Chess 2007). In the present book, I refer frequently to this earlier work using the abbreviation *TPIBAW*. These references are designed to assist the orientation of readers who own both volumes, while also helping 'new' readers to decide whether or not they need *TPIBAW* in their library. *Chess Developments: The Pirc* is a fully self-contained book – but summaries of earlier theory as well as established strategic concepts are necessarily brief, and in this sense it is *also* a sequel to *TPIBAW*. As always, I have aimed to provide objective analysis and assessments, not merely to cheerlead the black cause. Nevertheless, the choice of material in the present book has mainly been directed by what seems to me, as a lifelong Pirc player myself, to fulfil the needs of black players.

The present book also includes some references to another book published by Everyman Chess in 2009: *Dangerous Weapons: The Pirc and Modern*, by Richard Palliser, Colin McNab and James Vigus. However, the overlap here is likewise negligible, with only one main game (no.6) common to both books.

The Bibliography lists works relevant to the Pirc since 2007, as well as a selection of the older texts that I continued to consult while preparing the notes for this book. Thanks to one of the swings typical of chess fashion, I have had far fewer white repertoire books to deal with this time; with queen's pawn openings currently in ascendancy at the highest level, only the white repertoire work by Andrew Greet has made any significant impact on Pirc theory. By far the most useful source has been the ChessPublishing website, where John Watson has put the Pirc (and *TPIBAW*) under the microscope in many updates. I contributed some updates as Watson's guest, and since then Pirc annotations on this website have appeared by grandmasters Neil McDonald, Milos Pavlovic and Gawain Jones.

One general development in approaches to the Pirc during the past five years stands out. This is the rise of Schmid Benoni structures (compare 1 d4 c5 2 d5 Nf6

3 Nc3 g6 4 e4 d6, which incidentally is not a bad way for a Pirc player to consider meeting 1 d4). Benoni formations have enjoyed something of a renaissance of late, as the first volume in Everyman's *Chess Developments* series explored, and it's remarkable how often they will form the basis for successful queenside counterattacks from Black in this book. From White's point of view, meanwhile, I'm struck by the recent success of 4 Bg5, an aggressive approach developed in the 1960s by American players such as Robert Byrne. If you're a newcomer to the opening who is eager for an up-to-date anti-Pirc repertoire, you might wish to turn straight to Chapter Five.

I would like to thank John Emms for the material, advice and patience with which he has supported my work on this book, and Richard Palliser, from whom I have learned much about the Pirc especially while we worked together on the *Dangerous Weapons* project. Thanks also to my mother, and to my parents-in-law, for housing a 'writer in residence' at various times during university vacations.

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Rimini,

June 2012

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Chapter Two

Austrian Attack with 5...0-0

1 e4 d6 2 d4 Nf6 3 Nc3 g6 4 f4 Bg7 5 Nf3 0-0 (Diagram 1)

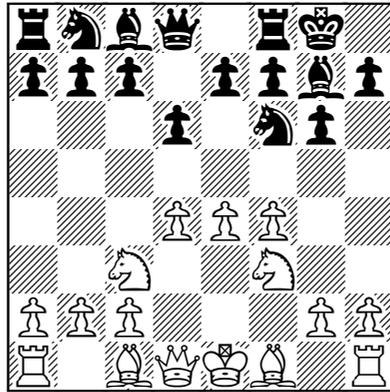


Diagram 1 (W)

The choice between 5...0-0 and 5...c5 remains a matter of taste rather than of theoretical correctness, but a majority continue to prefer immediate castling. White still occasionally responds with the hyper-aggressive 6 e5, but Game 10 confirms that – in theory at least – Black has nothing to fear here. Game 11 features the line 5 a3!? 0-0 6 Nf3, a handy device for White in case he wants to sidestep Chapter One of this book altogether, as 5 a3 c5?! 6 dxc5 is not recommended for Black. Games 12 and 13 cover the important move 6 Be3, which Andrew Greet has recently recommended in

his repertoire book for White. The complications in the main line with 6...b6 are fascinating, but I would also direct readers' attention to the sensible developing move 6...Nbd7 discussed in the notes to Game 12.

The rest of this chapter, Games 14-23, is devoted to the main line with 6 Bd3 (**Diagram 2**), where a number of recent developments have taken place, including at the highest level of play.

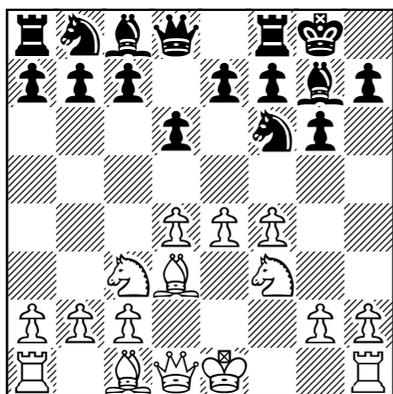


Diagram 2 (B)

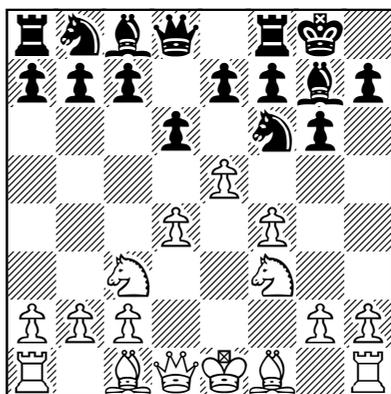


Diagram 3 (B)

Game 14 sees an experiment with 6...Nbd7!?, inviting White to lunge forward in the centre, while in Games 15-17 the more familiar and currently very reliable-looking 6...Nc6 comes under the microscope. Traditionally the latter move has the reputation of an equalizing attempt rather than a sharp winning try, however, and since grandmasters tend to employ the Pirc with aggressive intentions, the Benoni-style 6...Na6 has become the standard choice. Now 7 e5 (*TPIBAW*, Game 31) has fallen somewhat out of fashion and is not discussed in this book, and after the ubiquitous continuation 7 O-O c5 8 d5 we see Black choosing between the risky 8...Nc7 (Game 18), the generally reliable 8...Bg4 (Games 19 and 20), and the ambitious 8...Rb8 (Games 21-23), which has recently been given a boost by more wonderful play from Ivanchuk, as seen in the final game of this chapter.

Game 10
E.Sutovsky-V.Ivanchuk
Khanty-Mansiysk 2011

1 e4 g6 2 d4 Bg7 3 Nc3 d6 4 f4 Nf6 5 Nf3 0-0 6 e5 (Diagram 3) 6...Nfd7

Black has no theoretical reason to avoid this sharp line, but simplification with 6...dxe5 is a decent alternative for those who don't want to stretch their memory too far. Now 7 fxe5 (the less critical 7 dxe5 was patiently defused in S.Chekhov-V.Zvjaginsev, St Petersburg 2011: 7...Qxd1+ 8 Kxd1 Rd8+ 9 Ke1 Ne8 10 Be3 Nc6 11 Bb5 Nb4 12 Rc1 c6 13 Ba4 Nc7 14 Bc5 Nbd5 15 Nxd5 Nxd5 16 g3 Bg4 17 Kf2 b6 18 Be3 c5 19 Rcd1 Nxe3 20 Kxe3 f6 21 exf6 exf6 22 Rxd8+ Rxd8 23 c3 Be6 24 Bb3 c4 25 Ba4?? Rd3+ 26 Ke2 Rxf3, and Black won) 7...Nd5 8 Bc4 (8 h4!? was a wild experiment seen in H.Nakamura-V.Kramnik, Moscow (blitz) 2010; the game continued 8...Bg4 9 h5 c5 10 hxg6 hxg6 11 Rh4 Bxf3 12 Qxf3 Nb4 13 Bc4 and now 13...Nxc2+ 14 Kf1 Nxd4 15 Qh3 Nf5 looks a good way to dash White's hopes) 8...Nb6 (8...Be6 9 Qe2 c5 10 Bxd5 Bxd5 11 Nxd5 Qxd5 12 c4 Qd7 13 d5 e6 14 d6 Nc6 15 Bg5 h6 was agreed drawn in a double-edged position in V.Tregubov-A.Rakhmangulov, Yuzhny 2011) 9 Bb3 Nc6 10 0-0 Na5 11 Qe1?! (11 Qe2 is more natural) 11...Nxb3 12 axb3 Bf5 13 Qh4? (White must settle for 13 Rf2 with equality) 13...Bxc2 14 Rf2 Bxb3 15 Ng5 h5 16 Ra3 Bc4 17 Nce4 Qxd4! 18 Nf6+ exf6 19 Qxd4 Rfd8 won for Black in H.Stevic-I.Smirin, Plovdiv 2008.

7 h4

7 Bc4 Nb6 8 Bb3 Nc6 9 Ne4 Na5 10 0-0 Nxb3 11 axb3 f6 12 exf6 exf6 was the Alekhine Defence-like continuation of B.Filipovic-J.Skoberne, Sibenik 2009, with equality.

7...c5 8 h5 cxd4 9 hxg6 dxc3 10 gxf7+ Rxf7 (Diagram 4) 11 Bc4

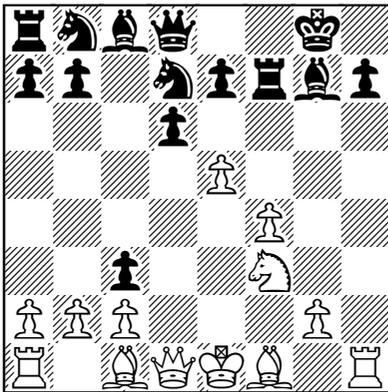


Diagram 4 (W)

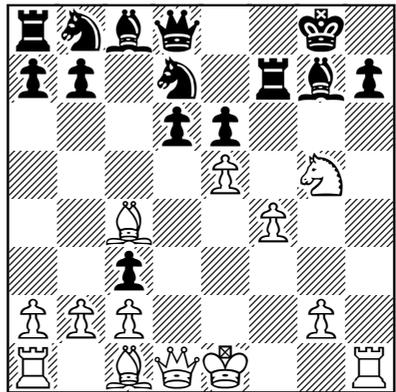


Diagram 5 (B)



WARNING! It's time for White to develop! 11 e6? cxb2 12 exf7+ Kf8 13 Bxb2 Bxb2 was disastrous for him in V.Zhuravlev-A.Vitolins, Latvian Championship 1967.

11...e6!

This is more ambitious than the alternative 11...Nf8, after which in A.Shirov-I.Smirin, Odessa (rapid) 2007, Black soon collapsed: 12 Bxf7+ (Nakamura preferred 12 Ng5 in another quick win against Smirin – see Game 20 in *TPIBAW*) 12...Kxf7 13 Ng5+ Kg8 14 Qh5 dxe5?? (after 14...h6, 15 Qf7+ Kh8 16 Qb3 Qa5 17 Nf7+ Kh7 18 Ng5+ concluded in a draw by repetition in S.Nadyrhanov-V.Tseshkovsky, Krasnodar 1999) 15 Qf7+ Kh8 and now 16 Qb3 should win for White.

12 Ng5 (Diagram 5)

White must of course avoid 12 Bxe6? Nxe5!.

12...cxb2!?



KEY DEVELOPMENT: This bold new move (well, new at top grand-master level!) provides Black with the opportunity of playing for a win.

Compare:

a) 12...Nf8 13 Nxf7 Kxf7 is discussed at length in the notes to Game 20 in *TPIBAW*. Now a new and quite dangerous idea is Watson's 14 b3!?, reducing Black's counterplay and providing a new outlet for White's dark-squared bishop. This is difficult to handle for both sides, but in general White's plan of f4-f5 may make life difficult for the second player.

b) 12...Nxe5! remains the safe choice for Black. To recap the line given in *TPIBAW*: 13 Qh5 (the only move; 13 fxe5? cxb2 14 Nxf7 bxa1Q 15 Nxd8 Qxe5+ is catastrophic) 13...h6 14 fxe5 hxg5 15 Qh7+ Kf8 16 Qh8+ Bxh8 17 Rxh8+ Kg7 18 Rxd8 Nc6 19 Rxd6 Nxe5 20 Be2 Bd7 21 bxc3 Rh8 was agreed drawn in L.Garcia Caballero-A.Gual Pascal, Spanish Team Championship 1998.

13 Bxb2 Qa5+ 14 Ke2 (Diagram 6) 14...Nf8!?

Again Ivanchuk chooses to maintain the tension, while shoring up his e6- and h7-pawns. Alternatives in this unexplored position are equally murky:

a) 14...Nb6 15 Bd3 Qd5 looks like the wrong direction for the knight, but does mobilize the queen.

b) 14...d5 15 Bd3 (White could try 15 Nxf7 Kxf7 16 Bd3 h6 17 Rh3) was played in

F.Winiwarter-F.Hager, Austrian League 1995, when the computer recommends greed with 15...Re7 16 Bxh7+ Kf8, but I don't trust Black's undeveloped position.

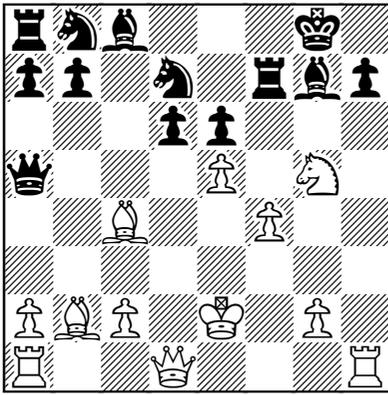


Diagram 6 (B)

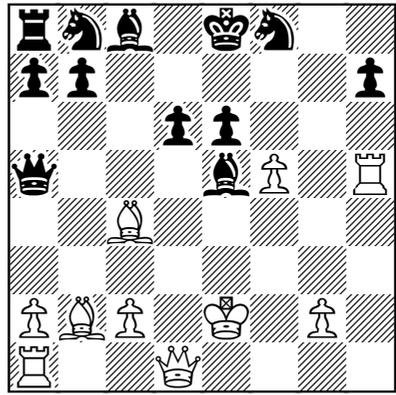


Diagram 7 (W)

15 Nxf7 Kxf7 16 f5?

Sutovsky presumably overlooked something in the following complications; why else did he avoid 16 Qxd6? An evaluation of this unbalanced position may have to wait until Ivanchuk reaches it. I would just note that in addition to the obvious 16...Nc6, Black can try 16...Qa4 17 Qd3 (or 17 Bd3 Bd7) 17...Na6, aiming at both the c5- and b4-squares while leaving open a path for the light-squared bishop to reach c6. I'm afraid I'll have to call this 'unclear'.

16...Bxe5 17 Rh5?!

This also looks artificial. Black may be undeveloped, but the knight on f8 is playing a heroic defensive role.

17...Ke8! (Diagram 7) 18 fxe6? Bxe6?

This game has the hallmarks of early time-trouble; 18...Qb4! would have been a decisive fork.

19 Bxe6 Qb5+ 20 Qd3 Qxb2 21 Qf5 Qb5+ 22 c4 Qb2+ 23 Kf3 Nc6?!

Good enough in the end, but the cool-headed 23...Qxa1! 24 Qf7+ Kd8 25 Qxf8+ Kc7 26 Rxh7+ Kb6 enables Black to escape the checks.

24 Qf7+ Kd8 25 Qxf8+ Kc7 26 Rxh7+ Kb6 27 Qxa8 Nd4+ 28 Kg4 Qxg2+ 29 Kh5 Qh2+ 30 Kg6 Qc2+ 31 Kh6 Bf4+ 32 Kg7 Nxe6+ 33 Kf6 Qxh7 34 Kxe6 Qg6+ 35 Ke7 Bg5+ 36 Kf8 Qf6+ 0-1