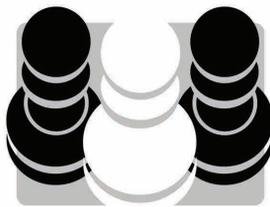


*Grandmaster Repertoire*

# The Sicilian Taimanov

By

**Antonios Pavlidis**



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# Preface

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Through my chess career, the majority, if not all, of my chess trainers have recognized my dynamic playing style and advised me to employ aggressive openings. In 2003, when I was around ten years old, my trainer Giorgi Khomeriki started working with me on my repertoire more seriously and taught me the Sicilian Dragon. About a year later, my next high-level trainer, Jovan Petronic, advised me to avoid the Dragon and instead taught me about other thematic Sicilian structures. At first I was reaching these structures through sidelines such as the Pin Variation, Grivas Sicilian and others; but looking back now, I can see that everything I learned around that time proved to be of value when I started employing the Taimanov System (or Paulsen, as it is sometimes known) some years later.

In 2007 I started working with my next trainer, Spiros Kapnisis, who suggested a switch against 1.e4 from the Sicilian to 1...e5, as he believed that learning and playing classical Ruy Lopez lines would help to improve my general understanding of chess. After a period of work on 1.e4 e5, he bought for me as a present the book *The Safest Sicilian: A Black Repertoire with 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6* by Alexander Delchev and Semko Semkov. This was my first specific introduction to the Black side of the Sicilian Taimanov, which would go on to become my favourite chess opening. Immediately I started studying the ideas in the book – which I regard as one of the best Sicilian books on the market at that time. I discovered a lot of variations which suited my dynamic style, and also noticed that, despite its excellent theoretical reputation, the Taimanov contained noticeably fewer forcing theoretical lines than sharp systems such as the Najdorf. My early results with the Taimanov were quite favourable, especially against fellow juniors. I soon realized that the Taimanov was going to be my main weapon against 1.e4 for years to come.

The next stage of my chess career was a challenge, as I strived to make the jump from IM to GM. During this phase of competing in GM-level tournaments, I decided to put the Taimanov on the back burner and switched to 1...e5 as my primary defence, as I wanted to play more solidly with Black against higher-rated opponents. After becoming a GM in 2014, I kept 1...e5 as my main defence but decided to bring the Taimanov back into my repertoire as a secondary choice. Thus I started working on it again, but in a more professional way than before. In addition to being a good fit for my playing style, the Taimanov has long been a popular choice among Greek GMs, since the time when Igor Miladinovic was playing for the Greek national team, through to the next generation of GMs such as Banikas, D. Mastrovasilis, Halkias, Kapnisis and others. Being among such players, the Taimanov was a natural opening to play and study. It was in 2015, after a couple of poor-quality 1.e4 e5 games with Black against Firman and Gopal, that I decided to commit to the Taimanov as my primary response to 1.e4. By then, I was mature enough to understand that my style was much more suited to the dynamic battleground of the Taimanov than the positional struggles which are typically associated with the Ruy Lopez or the Italian Game.

In general, I regard the Sicilian Taimanov as an opening which can largely be played by understanding, without much need for long, forcing computer lines. With that being said, we live in an era in which a certain amount of memorization is required to play any opening against strong opposition, and the Taimanov is no exception. This is especially true since many top GMs such as Anand, Caruana, Giri and others have incorporated it into their repertoires. Repeated testing of the Taimanov at the elite level, not to mention correspondence games, has naturally led to a lot of new discoveries.

In this book, you will find a number of lines which have been analysed in great depth. This does not mean you have to memorize every move of the analysis to play this opening! Obviously there are certain details which are essential to know, but most players will only have to remember a small fraction of the material contained in these pages. When I have analysed deeply, it has mostly been to meet my own standards for checking that a certain line is objectively correct. For the great majority of readers, the longer lines of analysis may be of interest for their illustration of certain tactical resources, thematic piece manoeuvres and so on, but attempting to memorize every move would be unnecessary, and perhaps even counterproductive.

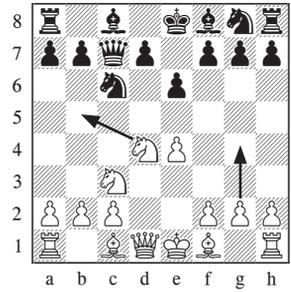
As a final remark, I would say it is not without reason that the Sicilian is Black's most popular response to 1.e4 – and although I may be biased, I cannot think of a better Sicilian variation for a practical player than the Taimanov. It blends a number of the positive features of other Sicilians: excellent theoretical soundness, a flexible pawn structure and dynamic counterattacking prospects. It lends itself fairly well to an ideas-based approach as opposed to endless memorization of computer lines, and it is flexible enough to allow you to vary your responses to each of White's main tries, in case a problem arises in one line, or you simply feel like expanding your options. In short, it is an opening which can serve you well for a lifetime.

I hope you will find the ideas in the book useful, and I wish you success in your Taimanov games.

Antonios Pavlidis  
Kavala, April 2019

# Chapter 7

5. ♘c3 ♔c7



6. ♘db5 & 6.g4!?

## Variation Index

1.e4 c5 2. ♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4. ♘xd4 ♘c6 5. ♘c3

5... ♔c7

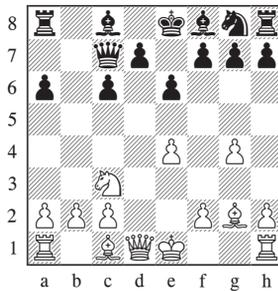
A) 6. ♘db5	125
B) 6.g4!? a6!	130
B1) 7. ♘xc6	131
B2) 7. ♕e3	132
B3) 7. ♕g2	133
B4) 7.h4	134

A) note to 13. ♖g4



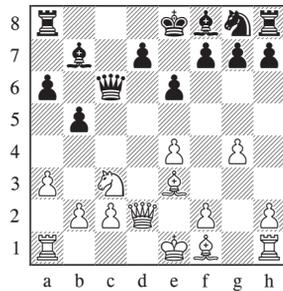
17... ♘e7!N

B1) after 8. ♕g2



8... d5!N

B2) after 10. ♖d2



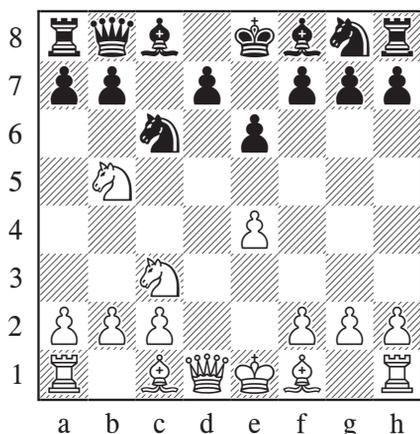
10... ♘f6!N

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘c6  
5.♘c3 ♖c7

In this chapter we will analyse two options, both of which have active intentions, albeit in completely different ways: **A) 6.♘db5** and **B) 6.g4!?**

I will mention in passing that 6.♘xc6 is harmless, and requires no special analysis. Black has a pleasant choice between 6...bxc6, which resembles variation E from Chapter 1, and 6...dxc6, reaching a structure which is covered in more detail in the notes to variation A of Chapter 9 on page 165.

### A) 6.♘db5 ♖b8



#### 7.♙e3

This is the only move which requires serious attention.

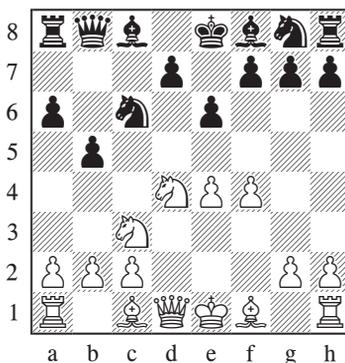
7.g3 a6 8.♘d4 gives Black a choice. 8...♖c7 is a simple way of transposing to Chapter 8, but he can also play ...♙e7 combined with ...♘f6 and ...0-0.

Also harmless is:

7.f4 a6 8.♘d4 b5!

8...♖c7 is the most common move but I don't see a reason to move the queen again so soon; besides, this would reach a line from

the 6.f4 variation which falls outside of our repertoire.



#### 9.♘xc6

This is the only move that makes sense to my eyes. Against anything else, Black continues with ...♙b7 and White can hardly justify the loss of time with his knight.

#### 9...dxc6 10.♙e3

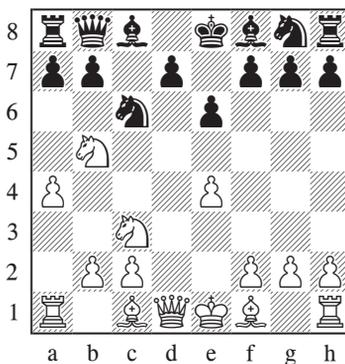
This occurred in Preto Diego – Duarte, Bento Goncalves 2000, and now a logical continuation would have been:

#### 10...♙b7N

Black will continue with ...♙e7, ...♖c7 and ...c5. If White plays a quick e4-e5, Black's knight will be developed on h6; otherwise Black will play ...♘f6 and meet e4-e5 with ...♘d5. Chapter 9 contains further advice about how to handle such positions.

#### 7.a4

This has been played in more than 150 games but it is not impressive at all.



7...a6 8.♠a3 ♠f6

White's position already looks suspicious to me. The knight is poorly placed on a3, and Black has a lot of ideas involving ...♗b4, ...d5 or even ...b5!?

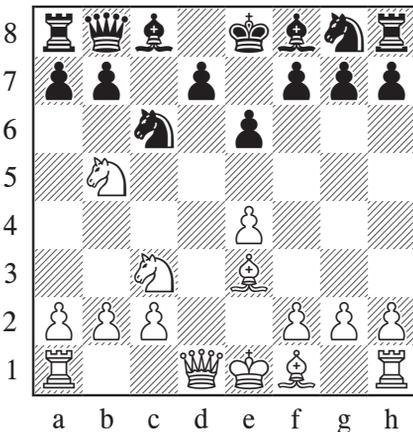
9.♗d3

9.g3 d5 10.exd5 occurred in Dutina – Jankovic, Biograd 2018, when 10...exd5!N would have kept the a3-knight out of the game.

The text move allows the same dynamic response:

9...d5 10.exd5 exd5! 11.0-0 ♗e7

Black was fine in Sinkevich – Tunik, St Petersburg 2000. After castling on the next move, he can mobilize his pieces with moves like ...♖e8, ...♗d6, ...♗d7 and ...♚c7, perhaps followed by doubling rooks along the e-file and creating threats on the kingside. White will most probably have to continue with a plan such as ♠e2, c2-c3 and ♠c2 to improve his problem knight, but in general his pieces are too passive for him to think of being better.



7...a6 8.♗b6!?

This piece sac is what gives White's set-up a unique character.

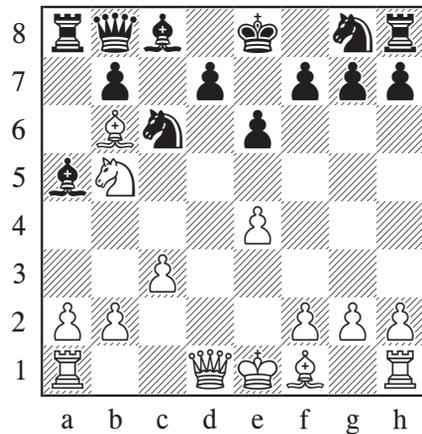
8.♠d4 is harmless as usual. Black can transpose to normal paths with 8...♚c7 if he wishes,

but it looks more ambitious to opt for fast development with 8...♠f6.

8...axb5 9.♠xb5 ♗b4†

9...♖a5 10.♠c7† ♗e7 is playable but I prefer the text move. Rather than clinging to the extra material, Black heads for a promising middlegame with three minor pieces against a queen and pawn.

10.c3 ♗a5



11.♠c7†

11.♠d6†?! is not so good in view of 11...♗f8! 12.♗c5 ♠ge7 13.♚h5 ♠d8♞ as seen in Lugo – Gulamali, Internet (rapid) 2017. Black has dealt with the immediate threats and intends ...♗c7 in order to get rid of the strong knight.

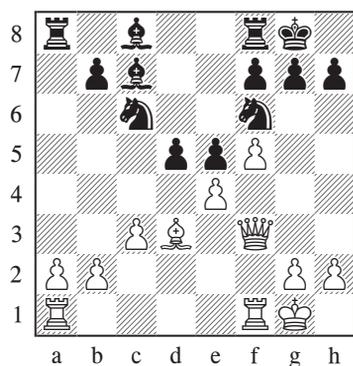
11...♚xc7 12.♗xc7 ♗xc7 13.♚g4

Other moves fail to put any pressure on Black, who can follow pretty much the same plan regardless of how White plays.

13.g3 ♠f6 14.♗g2 0-0 15.0-0 has been played in a couple of games, and now 15...d5!N would have opened the position with at least equal chances for Black.

13.♗c4 ♠f6 14.♚e2 is well met by 14...0-0N, followed by ...d5 with tempo.

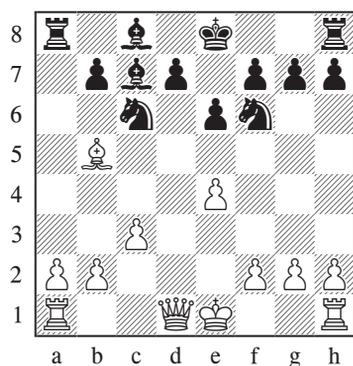
13.♙d3 ♘f6 14.0–0 0–0 15.f4 (otherwise ...d5 comes again) 15...e5! 16.f5 d5 17.♚f3 occurred in Koelber – Prato, Austria 2014, when Black could have obtained a great position with:



17...♘e7! Nf7 Intending to increase the central pressure with ...♙d7-c6, or even ...♙a4.

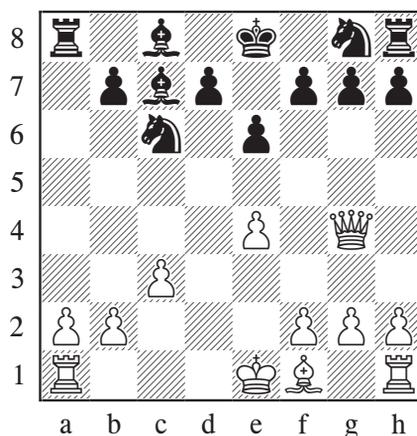
13.♙e2 ♘f6 14.♚c2 0–0 15.0–0 d5 16.exd5 exd5 was slightly better for Black in P. Nguyen – Bui, Can Tho 2001. A good plan for the next few moves will be ...♙e6 and ...♘e5, with lots of active possibilities for the minor pieces.

Finally, 13.♙b5 should also be met by 13...♘f6 when play may continue:



14.0–0N This seems most flexible, as Black is not really threatening to take on e4 yet. 14...0–0 (14...♘xe4?! 15.♚g4 regains the pawn and leads to a messier position where the queen's power could make itself felt.) Now White can

defend the central pawn in a few ways, but the general assessment is the same. The computer thinks White is okay for the time being, but it seems to me that by following the familiar plan of ...d5 followed by ...exd5, Black has good chances to make his three minor pieces dominate the queen in the long run.



### 13...g6!

I believe this to be the strongest move. The weakening of the dark squares is not too significant, since White has given up the three minor pieces which could have been used to attack them. Moreover, the king can artificially castle via f8-g7, which should keep things solid.

### 13...♙e5

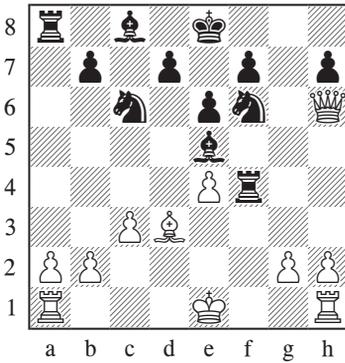
This move is also playable. I will say something about it because I have fond memories of it from my childhood, after I studied it with the help of *The Safest Sicilian* by Alexander Delchev and Semko Semkov, as I mentioned earlier. I will not go into much detail but I would just like to show one of my favourite variations:

14.f4 ♘f6 15.♚xg7?

15.♚f3 ♙c7 is the main line, which brought me an eventual victory in Mihalinc – Pavlidis, Rijeka 2010. I was rated a bit under 2400 when the game was played, but I was

still one of the strongest players to test this variation.

15... ♖g8 16. ♚h6 ♖g6 17. ♚h4 ♖g4 18. ♚h6 ♖xf4 19. ♔d3



At this point, Delchev and Semkov proposed the fancy solution:

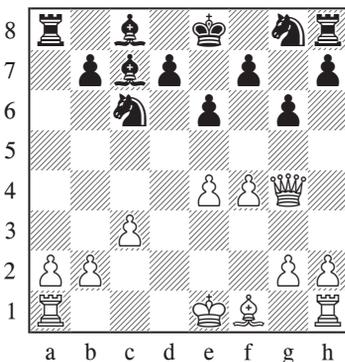
19... ♖f2!?

They evaluate this move as “!” and the position as better for Black. The engines of today cast doubt on this verdict (19... ♖g4!-+ is actually much stronger) but I still want to pay tribute to this fantastic move, which was one of the big inspirational factors which motivated me to take up the Taimanov.

14. ♔b5

I regard this as the main line, although there are several other options worth mentioning.

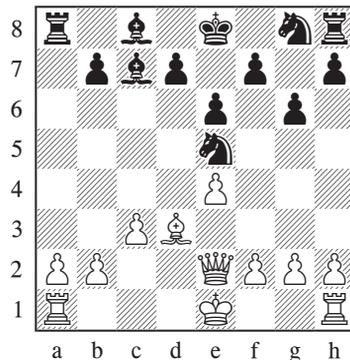
14.f4?! should be met by the following novelty:



14...d5!N Once again, I believe that Black should opt for the most direct approach and hit White’s centre. 15.e5 ♖ge7 Black’s minor pieces have much better prospects than White’s queen. One useful move is ... ♔b6 to prevent White from castling on the kingside; another obvious idea is to play ... ♖f5 and ...h5.

After 14. ♚h4 I suggest the same approach as in our main line below: 14... ♖f8!N (rather than 14... ♖ge7, which has been chosen by a few strong players) White’s queen on h4 is intended to monitor the dark squares on the kingside, so it looks completely logical to post the king on g7 and follow up with ... ♖f6 and the typical ...d5 break.

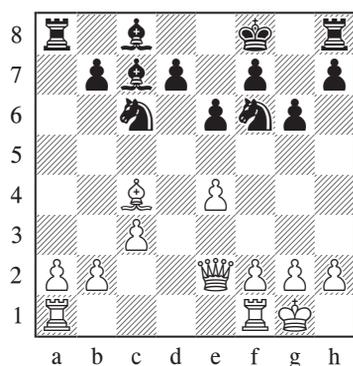
14. ♔d3 ♖e5 (14... ♖f8!N could be considered here too) 15. ♚e2 has been played in a bunch of games, with Black trying a few different responses. My suggestion is:



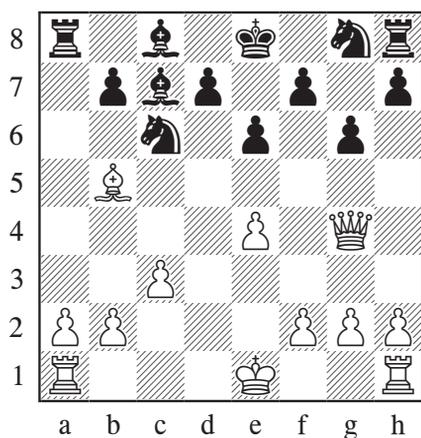
15... ♖xd3† The simplest move. By exchanging a knight for White’s last bishop, Black minimizes the risk of losing, while still keeping some chances for his minor pieces to outclass the queen. After 16. ♚xd3 a logical line continues 16... ♖e7 17.0-0-0 18.a4 d5! and once again Black’s position is easier to play.

Finally, 14. ♔c4 should be met by a familiar idea: 14... ♖f8! Threatening ...d5, since there will be no check along the e-file. (14... ♖ge7 is more popular but once again I prefer the plan

of transferring the king to g7.) 15.♞e2 ♘f6 16.0–0



16...d5 17.exd5 exd5 18.♖b5 ♔g7 I believe that Black is already slightly better. He will continue with ...♗f5 or ...♗e6, followed by centralizing his rooks. The king is not only safe on g7, but also plays a useful role in defending the dark squares.



#### 14...♔f8!

Most games have continued with 14...♘ge7 but it should be obvious by now that I prefer the set-up with the king on g7 and knight on f6, in conjunction with ...d5.

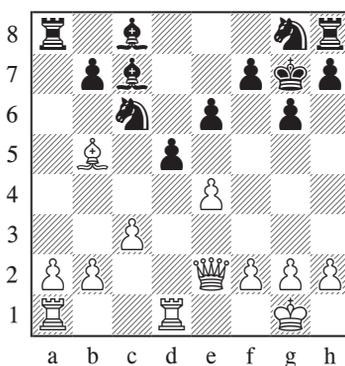
#### 15.0–0

15.f4 d5 16.e5 ♘ge7 was excellent for Black in Lucchini – Martins, corr. 2007, which was the stem game with 14...♔f8!.

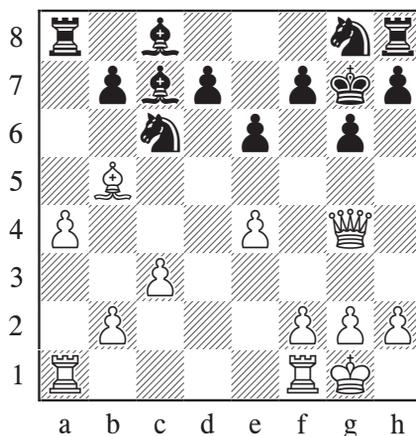
15.♞h4 ♔g7 16.0–0 d5 was also fine for Black in Kushagra – Saravana, Hyderabad 2017; his general plans and ideas for such positions have already been discussed.

#### 15...♔g7 16.a4

A model game for Black continued: 16.♞e2 d5 17.♞fd1 (17.exd5N exd5 18.a4 ♘f6 transposes to our main line below)



17...♘f6 18.f3 dxe4 19.fxe4 ♗e5! Black had excellent control on the dark squares in Snuverink – Van Kampen, Hinckley 2014.

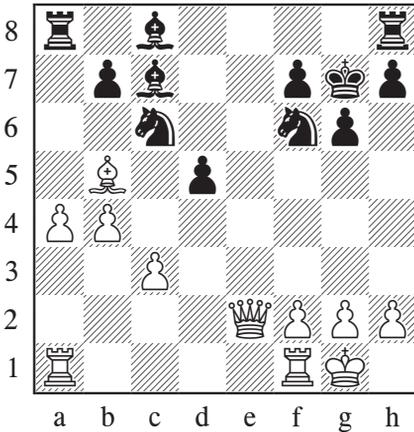


#### 16...♘f6 17.♞e2 d5 18.exd5 exd5

Black has reached his standard set-up for this variation.

#### 19.b4

If White does not do something active, he will simply be worse after Black brings his pieces into play. Therefore he tries to advance a pawn to a6 in order to create some disruption.



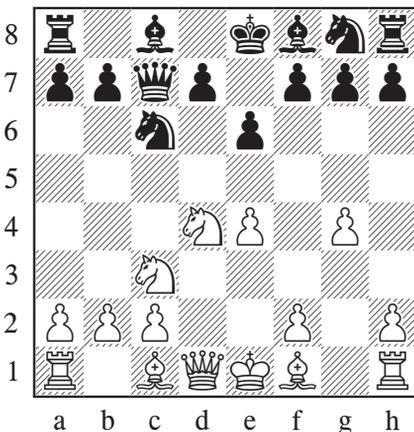
**19...♞e8!N**

This is my improvement over 19...♞f5 20.a5 ♜e4∞ as played in Low – Ganguly, Pattaya 2015.

**20.♚b2 ♞d7!**

I prefer to develop the bishop in this way so that the knight on c6 will be safe. The position is challenging for both sides but I prefer Black's chances; one possible plan is to target the c3-pawn with ...♞e5 and ...♜e4.

**B) 6.g4!?**



This move came as a huge surprise to me when I saw it employed by Magnus Carlsen in his game against Kasimdzhanov in the 2017 World Rapid Championship. Although I had long been an active Taimanov player with both colours, this move had neither featured in my games nor attracted my attention in any way beforehand.

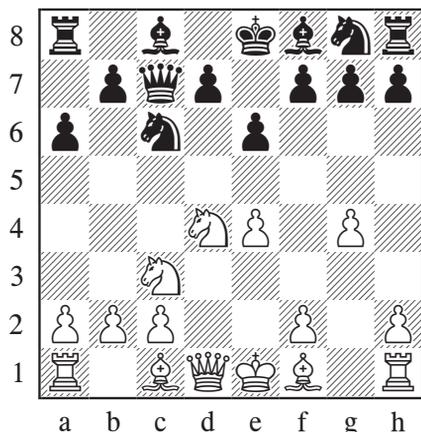
Obviously the plan of advancing the kingside pawns is common in many Sicilian variations, but usually White only goes for g4-g5 once Black's knight has moved to f6. However, there is a definite parallel with the Scheveningen Variation (1.e4 c5 2.♜f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♜xd4 ♜f6 5.♜c3 d6) when 6.g4 is the Keres Attack, one of White's most challenging ways of meeting Black's system. To avoid it, some Scheveningen fans prefer a modified version (reached after 1.e4 c5 2.♜f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♜xd4 ♜c6 5.♜c3 d6) in which the king's knight stays on g8 for the time being, in order to take the sting out of White's plan. However, even without the knight on f6 as a target, 6.g4 remains a reasonable option for White.

I believe White's general idea is similar to that of the modified Keres Attack mentioned above. However, whereas that line has a long history, having been played in a Karpov – Kasparov game in their 1985 World Championship match, the Taimanov variant is relatively new and unexplored.

**6...a6!**

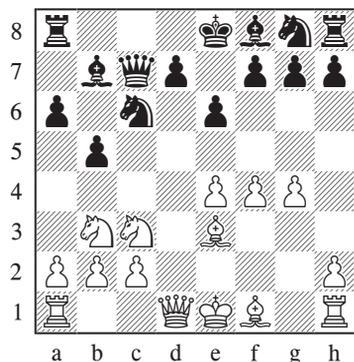
We should continue in our typical way. Since the g4-line is fresh, with not many games played, I would like to grab the opportunity to give some practical advice. When you play the Taimanov and face an unusual move which you have never studied, try to make practical moves which improve your own position and then try to figure out what your opponent's plan is. In the present case, moving the pawn to a6 is something which we usually do at some point. Besides, it is hard to think of anything

more useful to do, as developing the knight to f6 would make no sense at all with g4-g5 on the cards.



We will analyse four moves: **B1)** 7.♘xc6, **B2)** 7.♙e3, **B3)** 7.♙g2 and **B4)** 7.h4.

A rare alternative, once employed by the strong Russian GM Shomoev before the whole variation became fashionable, is: 7.f4 b5 8.♙e3 (8.♘xc6 ♚xc6! Once again I would advise you to recapture with the queen in this structure. Black's position is easy to handle, thanks to the simple plan of ...♙b7 and ...b4 to hit the e4-pawn.) 8...♙b7 9.♘b3 Here Black continued with 9...d6 in Shomoev – Bocharov, St Petersburg 2006, but I found an improvement:

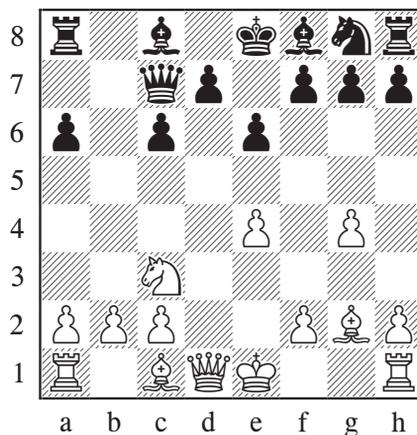


9...d5!N I prefer Black's chances, as White's kingside has too many holes.

### **B1)** 7.♘xc6 bxc6!

7...dxc6 was employed back in 2002, in a high-level game between Ehlvest and Lautier. However, I prefer to support the ...d5 advance in order to gain space in the centre.

### 8.♙g2



### 8...d5!N

8...♙d6 has been played in both of the existing games. Although there is nothing particularly wrong with fighting for the dark squares in that manner, I prefer to seize space in the centre before deciding how to develop the bishop.

### 9.0–0 h5!

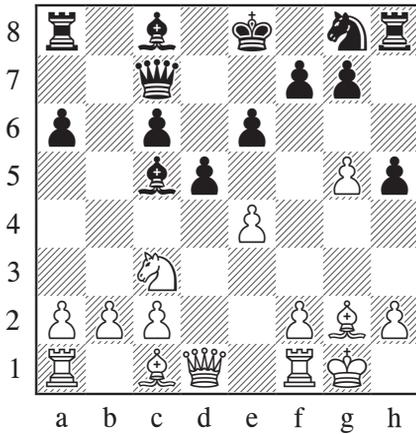
It makes a lot of sense to strike at White's strange kingside structure.

### 10.g5

After 10.gxh5 ♘f6 Black has an easy initiative on the kingside.

### 10...♙c5

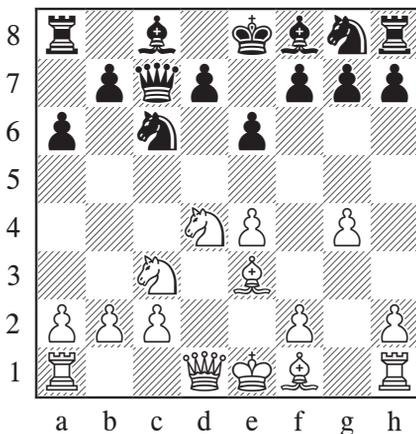
The dark-squared bishop is well placed on the same diagonal as White's king. My illustrative line continues:



11. ♖a4 ♚a7 12. ♙c3! ♙xc3 13. ♗xe3 ♜e7

Both sides have their trumps. White has seriously weakened his pawn structure in order to trade off Black's strong bishop, and he will now have to find some activity along the f-file or by arranging a timely c2-c4. Meanwhile Black's structure is better, and he will continue with moves like ...h4, ...♘g6 and ...0-0. Black also benefits from a strong outpost on e5, as well as the safer king. Objectively the position is about equal but I would prefer to play with the black pieces.

**B2) 7. ♙e3**



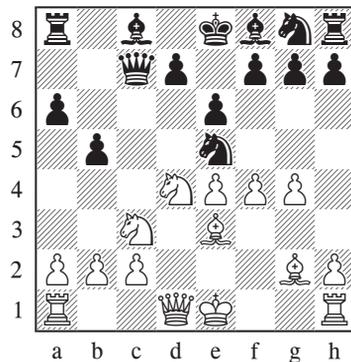
This time White plays in the spirit of the English Attack; indeed, it is possible to reach this position via the move order of 6. ♙e3 a6 7. g4.

Obviously Black should continue to delay the development of the g8-knight, so the following move is completely natural.

7...b5! 8. ♜xc6

I checked two other moves:

8. ♙g2 gives Black a few good options but my favourite is 8...♜e5! to exploit the newly weakened c4-square. 9.f4 I found nothing better than this move, but Black can respond with:

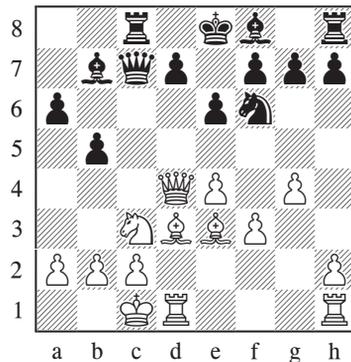


9...♜c4 10. ♙c1 ♙c5! Black had a slightly better position in Nichols – Wosch, email 2011, with ...♜e7-c6 an obvious plan.

Another instructive line is:

8. ♚d2 ♜xd4!

Now that White has moved his queen, it is a good time to make this exchange, since the following recapture will cost White a tempo. 9. ♚xd4 ♙b7 10.0-0-0 ♜c8 11. ♙d3 ♜f6 12.f3 Here I found a useful improvement:



12...b4!N

12...♙c5 13.♚xc5 ♖xc5 14.♙xc5 ♜xc5 was seen in T. Horvath – Wyss, Silvaplana 2003, and one other game. Even though this endgame should be fine for Black, there is no need to force the queens off so soon, as Black's attacking chances are at least as good as White's.

13.♘e2 d5! 14.♙f4 ♖c6 15.exd5 ♚xd5

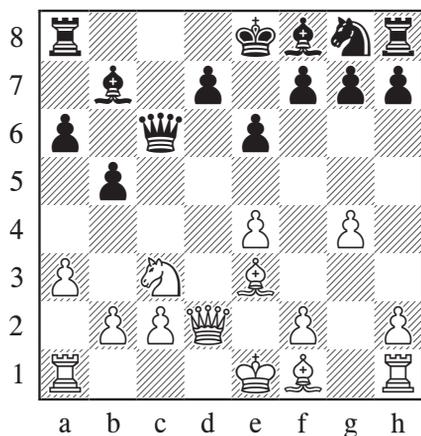
The queens are likely to be exchanged soon, giving Black an improved version of the Horvath – Wyss game. The removal of Black's d-pawn and White's e-pawn makes the f3-pawn a clear target for Black's bishop.

8...♚xc6!

Once again I recommend recapturing with the queen. Actually I would go so far as to say that White's whole opening concept only really makes sense if Black recaptures with the d-pawn. See the comments on the Carlsen – Kasimdzhanov game on page 134 for a more detailed discussion about this point.

9.a3 ♙b7 10.♚d2

Here I found a logical novelty.



10...♘f6!N

10...♚c8 11.f3 reaches a position where it is not so easy for Black to equalize, as evidenced by the game continuation: 11...♘f6 12.g5 ♘h5

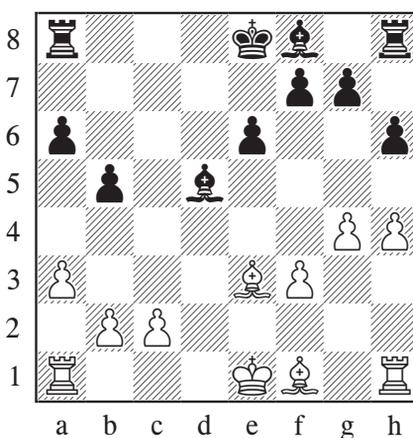
13.♙h3! b4 14.axb4 ♙xb4 15.♙g4 g6 16.♚d4±  
Mekhitarian – Barbosa, Buenos Aires 2015.

11.f3 h6!

Black stabilizes the knight's position for just long enough to arrange ...d5. An illustrative line is:

12.h4 d5! 13.exd5 ♘xd5 14.♘xd5 ♚xd5  
15.♚xd5 ♙xd5

Black should be fine, as long as he keeps in mind an important positional motif:



16.♙f2 h5! 17.g5 ♙e7=

Black has a comfortable game after fixing White's kingside structure, rather than allowing the cramping h4-h5.

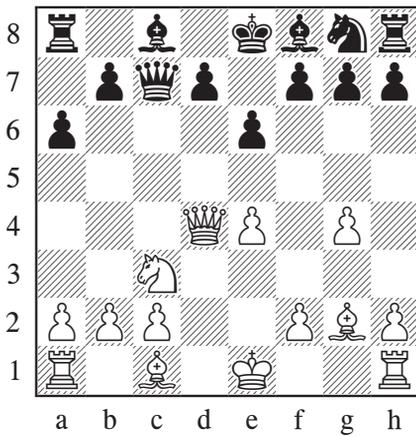
B3) 7.♙g2

This has been White's most popular choice and personally I find it the most natural move. White continues in a similar manner to the 6.g3 variation, but in a slightly more aggressive spirit, keeping the option of castling on either side.

7...♘xd4!?

This has only been played in a small minority of games but I like it.

8.♚xd4

**8...♖5!?:N**

8...♖e7 has been played in all three games thus far, but if I wanted to develop the knight here so quickly I would have preferred 7...♖ge7, which happens to be the main line.

**9. ♙e3**

In the event of 9.0–0 we can develop our knight in the typical way: 9...♖e7=

**9...♙b7 10.0–0–0**

10.0–0 can be met by 10...♖e7 and ...♖c6 (or 10...♙c8 first) with comfortable play. I will take the text move as the main line though, with the reasoning that if White wanted a quieter game with short castling, he would probably have opted for 6.g3.

**10...♙c8**

Threatening ...b4.

**11. ♜d2**

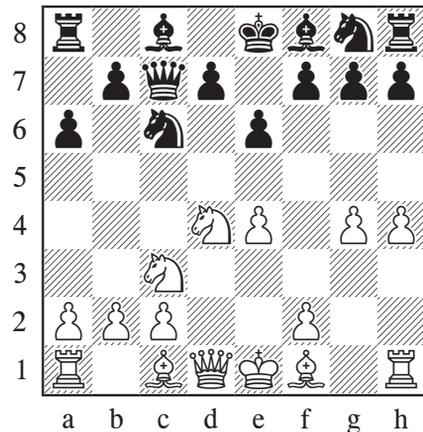
11.♙d2?! is well met by 11...♖f6 12.f3 d5± when it is not clear what the bishop is doing on g2.

**11...b4 12. ♖a4 ♖f6 13. ♙b6 ♜b8**

In view of the nasty threat of ...♙c6, White has nothing better than:

**14. ♙e3=**

It is up to Black whether he wishes to repeat the position with 14...♜c7 or play on in some other way.

**B4) 7.h4**

This has not been the most popular move, but it was played by Carlsen and has also been used successfully by some other strong GMs, so I will take it as my main line.

**7...♖xd4!**

An important moment. Before continuing the analysis, it is useful to compare the following alternative to appreciate why I prefer the text move.

**7...b5 8. ♖xc6 ♜xc6**

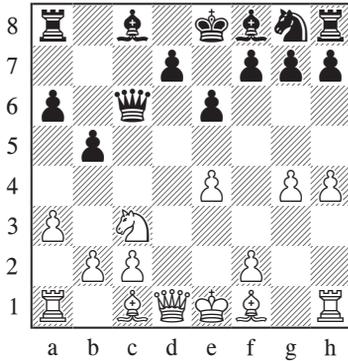
8...dxc6 is well met by the simple plan of 9.♙f3± followed by developing the c1-bishop and castling long. 9...e5 10.g5! Restricting Black's knight and introducing the idea of exchanging the light-squared bishops. 10...♙e6 11.♙h3! White had an easy initiative and Black was unable to solve his problems in Carlsen – Kasimdzhanov, Riyadh (rapid) 2017.

The text move is a better choice, leading to relatively normal play.

**9.a3!N**

This has not yet been played but it is likely to transpose to some existing games, and I

think it is most accurate for White to avoid having his knight driven away by a quick ...b4.



9...♙b7 10...♙g2 h5!?!N

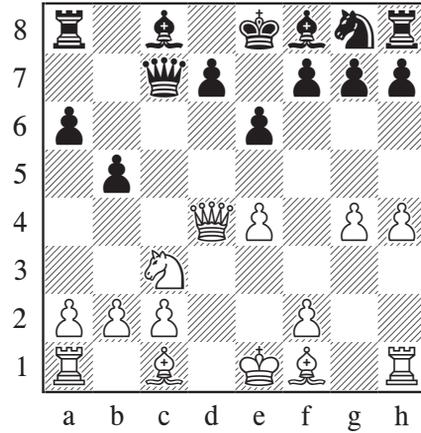
10...♙c5 11.♙f4 ♖e7 12.h5! gave White a serious space advantage on the kingside in Gharamian – Pelletier, Brest 2018. Obviously Black has some resources as well, but I don't fully trust his position.

11.gxh5!

This is more challenging than 11.g5 ♖e7, when Black is pretty solid. I will end my analysis here, with the assessment that White's last move opens the g-file while giving him an extra pawn, for a while at least, but it would take a much deeper investigation to determine if he can claim a genuine advantage.

Having explored the 7...b5 line, we can start putting into context the benefits of my recommended approach. The pawn structures are the same in both lines (assuming Black avoids the ...dxc6 structure), so the question is whether the exchange should take place on d4 or c6. It seems to me that in the 7...b5 8.♖e7 ♗xc6 ♗xc6 lines, Black will most probably want to retreat his queen to c7 at some point, in order to control the e5- and f4-squares and to make space for the knight to come to c6. Moreover, the queen is less vulnerable on c7 than c6. Taking all that into account, it makes perfect sense to start with 7...♖xd4.

8.♗xd4 b5



9.♙e3 ♙b7 10.a3?!

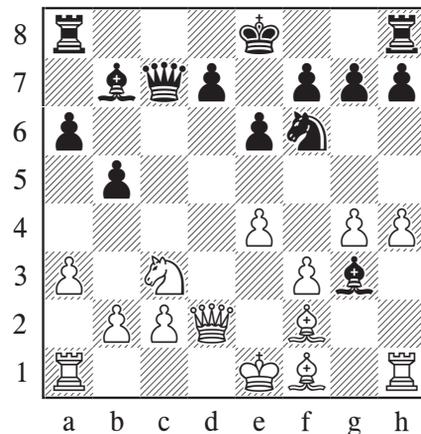
10.0–0–0N is a slight improvement although it leads to forcing play where Black is fine. 10...♗c8! Threatening ...b4. 11.♙d3 ♖f6 12.f3 b4 13.♖e2 d5! We have already seen this thematic break. Once again, the weakness of the f3-pawn should give Black a lot of play.

So far the position looks normal, but here Sethuraman comes up with a thematic yet still easy-to-miss idea.

10...♙d6!

Emphasizing the fact that White's early g2-g4 has permanently weakened his kingside dark squares.

11.♗d2 ♖f6 12.f3 ♙g3† 13.♙f2



**13...d5! 14.g5!?**

The lesser evil is 14. ♕xg3 ♜xg3† 15. ♞f2 when White can fight for a draw in a slightly worse endgame.

**14...♕f4 15.♕e3 ♕g3† 16.♕f2 ♖h5♣**

Black had clearly won the opening battle in Volokitin – Sethuraman, Riyadh (blitz) 2017. He has succeeded in controlling the dark squares and getting active with ...d5, while White's pawn advances have only created holes in his kingside.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has dealt with a couple of interesting sidelines. We started with 6. ♖db5 ♜b8 7. ♕e3 a6 8. ♕b6!? axb5 9. ♖xb5, which is an interesting attempt to catch Black with a quick raid on c7. Fortunately, 9... ♕b4† followed by ... ♕a5 is a good solution, leading to an interesting situation where Black has three pieces against a queen and pawn. I think Black's chances are at least equal, especially with the help of the strong plan of ...g6 followed by artificial castling.

6.g4!? is a recently fashionable idea. Obviously Black should be wary of developing the g8-knight for the time being, so the typical Taimanov move 6...a6! makes a lot of sense. We looked at four main options for White, of which 7.h4 is the most likely to appear on the board, considering Carlsen's successful use of it. Fortunately, after my suggested move-order finesse of 7... ♖xd4! 8. ♞xd4 b5, Black appears to be in excellent shape.

# Abridged Variation Index

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The Variation Index in the book is 7 pages long. Below is an abridged version giving just the main variations, not the sub-variations.

## Chapter 1

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♖c6

- A) 5.a3 14
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- C) 5.c4 18
- D) 5.♙e3 20
- E) 5.♗xc6 22

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- B) 7.♗1c3 a6 53

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5.♗b5 d6 6.c4 ♗f6 7.♗1c3 a6 8.♗a3 ♙e7  
9.♙e2 0–0 10.0–0 b6 11.♙e3 ♙b7

- A) 12.♙d2 63
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5.♗c3 ♙c7

- A) 6.♗db5 125
- B) 6.g4!? a6! 130

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5.♗c3 ♙c7 6.g3 a6! 7.♙g2 ♗f6! 8.0–0 ♗xd4  
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- A) 10.♙d1 140
- B) 10.♙d3 145
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5.♗c3 ♗c7 6.♙e2 a6

- A) 7.♗xc6 164
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- B) 10.♗d4!? 220

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9.♗a4 ♙e7 10.♗xc6 bxc6 11.♗b6 ♗b8  
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- A) 9...♗a5 340
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