

# **The Modernized Italian Game for White**

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Edited and translated by Kirill Kuznetsov

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# **The Modernized Italian Game for White**

**Alexander Kalinin**

*in collaboration with  
Nikolai Kalinichenko*

**Thinkers Publishing 2021**



## Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
⊙	lead in development
⊕	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
∞̄	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⊃	better is
⊆	worse is
+	check
#	mate

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## Foreword by the Authors

For more than a hundred years, nothing threatened the leading role of the Spanish Opening among the open games. In the old Ruy Lopez, White always managed to develop long-term strategic pressure on the opponent. Such was Black's discomfort, that at the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian master Semyon Alapin even proposed rearranging the initial position so that the black pawn stood on a6 rather than a7, just to prevent the white bishop from coming to b5, and grandmaster Savielly Tartakower called the Spanish Game 'a cow that White can milk forever'!

But things are changing. In recent years, something incredible has happened: the brilliant Spanish has been edged out by an old Renaissance opening; the Italian! Almost the entire world, all the way from those competing in world championship matches and elite events right down to players in amateur competitions, began to place their light-squared bishop on c4 on the 3rd move. We should note that the romantic times of the Greco Attack and the Evans Gambit are gone forever. The modern treatment of the Italian Game is filled with the ideas gleaned from the Spanish. White prefers the modest pawn advance d2-d3 as opposed to the rapid d2-d4, after which they often send their queen's knight along the Spanish knight's tour b1-d2-f1-g3. It is no wonder that such an interpretation of the opening was dubbed the Italian/Spanish Game by the experts. In fact, in the notes of the Italian masters of the 17th century, the line of the Italian Game with d2-d3 was named the *Giuoco Pianissimo*, or the "quietest game", which conveys its character with surprising accuracy.

The reason why the strongest modern chess players have adopted "the quietest game", is quite banal. At the top level, it has become increasingly difficult to play 'real' chess - if combative opening lines are chosen as the field of theoretical discussion - as the importance of engine-assisted preparation is simply too high. So grandmasters have had to find pastures new! As Sergey Karjakin noted, 'In our time, the theory of the Italian is only being developed, and everyone arranges the pieces as they want. Probably, this is one of those rare openings where you can still improvise from the very beginning with both colours, without much damage to the position.' For chess lovers, such a change in the opening views of the strongest players is a real success! A club player, having neither the time nor the ability to master the fashionable theoretical lines, has been previously forced to be content

with choosing some solid opening systems, which are not very popular amongst the grandmasters. Yet now the situation has changed dramatically.

To utilize the Giuoco Pianissimo successfully, a club player needs only to master the general ideas of this setup, without overloading their brain with hundreds of variations. At the same time, they find themselves in the pleasant company of the world's elite, and may even pick up recommendations to improve their opening from top grandmasters. Of course, such interactions will bring an amateur some concrete benefits in the opening, but more importantly it will increase their understanding of the game as a whole, because they will start to learn from the games of high-level players, with a vested interest!

The Giuoco Pianissimo has already been examined in an excellent book by K. Müller and G. Souleidis, *Winning with the Slow Italian (2016)*, aimed at the club player. However, in our opinion, the book contains too much concrete information in the form of variations and subvariations, which somewhat erodes the whole idea of the opening in question.

Therefore, in this book we will first reveal the main strategic ideas and typical plans of the modern Giuoco Pianissimo, and only then will the reader be offered a review of the modern theory of the Italian Game, centered around practical examples from grandmaster games.

In the Giuoco Pianissimo, a wide variety of move orders is employed, which often transpose into the same positions, making it difficult to clearly clarify any set theory from the very start. In this regard, the classification of theoretical material has been done on the basis of key opening/middlegame positions, rather than on the individual moves taken to get there. Such a presentation of theoretical lines should also help the reader to develop a better understanding of the opening.

All non-contact opening systems with a flexible pawn structure, such as the English Opening, the King's Indian Defense, and the Spanish Game, have an amazing ability to convey their ideas to other openings, even with reversed colors, due to the fact that, very often, similar pawn structures can arise. The Giuoco Pianissimo, or the Italian/Spanish Game, is no exception. In order to make the readers' opening weapon more universal, we have even included a chapter on the use of Italian/Spanish ideas in other open games in the book.



We hope, dear readers, that this book will help you to create an effective opening repertoire, to improve your understanding of chess strategy, and to bring you hours of enjoyment, spent on examining the instructive games of modern grandmasters and the greats of the past. We would also like to thank Thinkers Publishing, probably the most dynamic and comprehensive publishing house these days when it comes to opening theory, for their interest in the book.

Alexander Kalinin  
Nikolai Kalinichenko

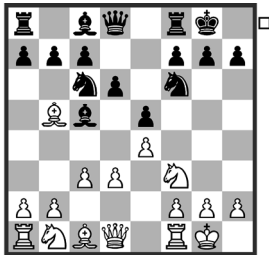




# **The Italian Game in Spanish Clothing**

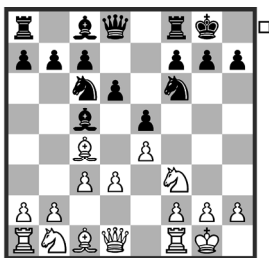
The 21st-century reader is sometimes wary of exploring the strategic thinking of chess players from many years ago, believing that all the wisdom of the world is to be found in the engine lines. They will be even more surprised when, before studying the theoretical variations of the Italian Game, we will ask them to get acquainted with the strategic ideas of the Spanish setup! To alleviate their, quite understandable, concerns, let's say a couple more words about the reasons that prompted the world's strongest players to set their sights on the old Italian Game.

In the Ruy Lopez, after **1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♙b5 ♘f6**, White faced an impenetrable fortress in the Berlin endgame, and so **4. d3** grew in popularity. If we make some more moves, **4... ♙c5 5. c3 0-0 6. 0-0 d6**, we arrive at the position shown in the diagram.



Position after: 6... d6

And now, let us set up the position after the moves **1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♙c4 ♙c5 4. c3 ♘f6 5. d3 0-0 6. 0-0 d6** in one of the lines of the Giuoco Pianissimo.



Position after: 6... d6

As we can see, both diagrams are basically the same. The placement of White's king's bishop is what makes them not completely identical. But it is highly questionable where it is located better.

We can only note that in the position that originates from the Italian, the bishop is already occupying the important a2-g8 diagonal.

It's amusing that in one of the recent encounters between Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Hikaru Nakamura, the French Grandmaster, after **1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♙b5 ♘f6 4. d3 ♙c5 5. c3 0-0 6. 0-0 ♖e8**, calmly retreated with the bishop to c4:



Position after: 6... ♖e8

**7. ♙c4!**

Since the strategic ideas of such setups were initially elaborated on by the eminent masters of the past through the Spanish move order, we will often turn to their Spanish games for the first piece of advice.

Now that we have allayed the concerns of our readers a little bit, we shall take a look at...

## A Historical Flashback: Italian/Spanish Idiosyncrasies

Courtesy of the Renaissance masters, there appeared two main branches in the Italian Game. These are the Giuoco Piano, 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.c3 ♘f6 5.d4, and the Giuoco Pianissimo, 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.d3. And while the evaluations of the sharp Giuoco Piano lines, and the Greco Attack in particular (4.c3 ♘f6 5.d4 exd4 6.cxd4 ♙b4+ 7.♘c3 ♘xe4 8.0-0), have changed more than once before stabilizing in the first quarter of the 20th century at around equal, the Giuoco Pianissimo has served as a model of peace, symmetry, and equal rights at all times.

In the Giuoco Pianissimo, White either developed their queen's knight to c3, for example, 4.d3 ♘f6 5.♘c3 d6 6.♙e3 ♙b6 7.♚d2 ♙e6 8.♙b3 ♚d7, or played c2-c3, which gives the pawn structure greater flexibility and introduces an element of asymmetry into the position. Even in the good old times, when the players did not try to make the most of the first-move advantage, and used to play the opening on the basis of common sense, there were chess masters who rose to the highest levels in their interpretation of the Giuoco Pianissimo.

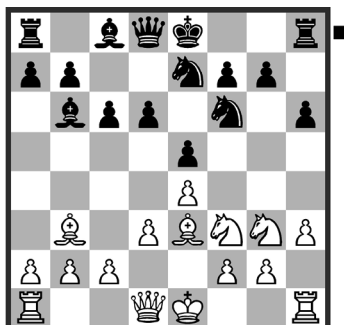
## Game 1

♁ Mason, James  
♂ Winawer, Szymon  
🌐 Vienna 1882

1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♚c4 ♚c5 4. d3  
d6 5. ♙e3 ♙b6 6. ♘bd2

The white knight is heading for f5.

6... h6 7. ♘f1 ♘f6 8. h3 ♘e7 9. ♘g3  
c6 10. ♙b3



Position after: 10. ♙b3

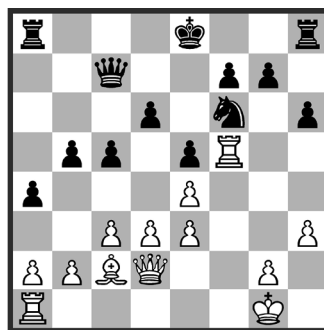
10... ♙xe3 11. fxe3

In the old days, the exchange on e3 was believed to be beneficial for White, as it gives him control over the semi-open f-file, and the e3-pawn helps him to control the center. Nowadays, the assessment of such positions is not that straightforward.

11... ♚b6 12. ♚d2 a5 13. c3 a4 14.  
♙d1 ♙e6 15. 0-0 ♚c7 16. ♘h4 b5

'More necessary was 16... ♘d7. Besides, the black pawns' position is unstable, since a counter-thrust such as c3-c4 may, at some future time, disarrange it' (Emanuel Lasker).

17. ♙c2 c5 18. ♘gf5 ♙xf5 19. ♘xf5  
♘xf5 20. ♖xf5



Position after: 20. ♖xf5

20... ♘d7?!

Rejecting short castling leads Black to difficulties.

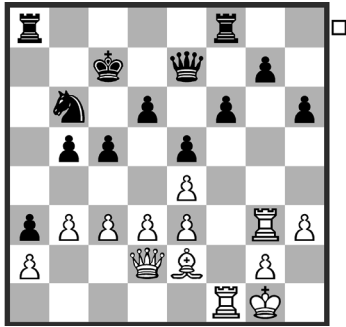
After 20... 0-0 21. ♖af1 ♘h7, doubling the rooks on the f-file does not bring White concrete benefits, and the prospect of his g- and h-pawns moving forward does not look too appealing. The chances are about even.

21. ♖af1 f6 22. ♙d1!

Emphasizing the vulnerability of the light squares in the enemy position.

22... a3 23. ♙h5+ ♚e7 24. b3 ♖hf8

25. ♖5f3 ♞b6 26. ♜g3 ♔d8 27. ♙g4  
 ♚e7 28. ♞e2 ♚c7

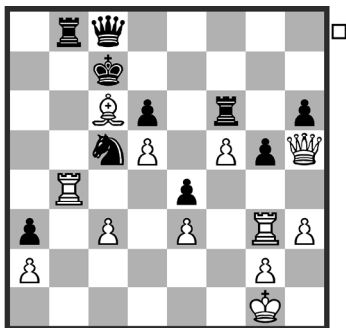


Position after: 28... ♚c7

29. d4!

Here, the insecure position of the enemy king means that White has a clear advantage.

29... c4 30. ♜b1 g5 31. bxc4 bxc4 32.  
 ♜b4 ♚e6 33. d5 ♚c8 34. ♙xc4 ♞a4  
 35. ♙b5 ♞c5 36. ♚e2 f5 37. exf5 e4  
 38. ♙c6 ♜b8 39. ♚h5 ♜f6

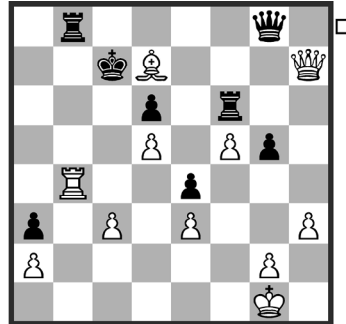


Position after: 39... ♜f6

40. ♜xg5!

The start of an ingenious combination that cracks open Black's position.

40... hxg5 41. ♚h7+ ♞d7 42. ♙xd7  
 ♚g8!



Position after: 42... ♚g8!

The best defense. If 42... ♙xd7 then 43. ♜c4+ ♔d8 44. ♚h8+ would be very bad news for the second player.

43. ♜b7+!!

A brilliant blow combining the ideas of deflection and decoy. The cold-blooded computer points out a trivial win after 43. ♚e7 ♚f7 44. ♜c4+ ♔b6 45. ♚xe4 ♙xd7 46. ♚d4+, but even this alternative solution hardly overshadows the brilliance of James Mason's combination.

43... ♔xb7 44. ♙c8+!!

An extremely pretty finish!

1-0

As already noted, the modern interpretation of the Giuoco Pianissimo is closely intertwined with ideas from the Spanish. This is particularly true for the slower lines of the Ruy Lopez, when White plays d2-d3.




Grandmaster Yuri Razuvaev believed that those who are interested in the variations with d2-d3 in the Spanish should study a dozen games of Wilhelm Steinitz, and thoroughly analyze the clash between Fischer and Smyslov, Havana 1965. Let us follow the advice of this wonderful chess player and wise coach.

First of all, we will go and learn from Wilhelm Steinitz, since it was the first world champion who developed the fundamental strategic foundations of the Spanish setups associated with d2-d3.

To set the scene, the first official match for the World Chess Championship between W. Steinitz and J. Zukertort was reaching its climax. After 15 games, the score was 6-5 in favor of Steinitz (note that draws were not counted, as they played to 10 wins). At this point, Steinitz faced a difficult task in trying to press with the white pieces, as in the previous even-numbered games, Zukertort had not not experienced any problems in the opening. The preceding seven games, when Steinitz was white, started with 1.e4 e5, and the result was +2, -2, =3 for Steinitz. All of them came down to direct encounters which were often tactical, in which the future first world champion could not fully demonstrate his strategic prowess. The most popular line was the following variation of the Spanish: 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♗f6 4.0-0 ♗xe4 5.♖e1 ♘d6 6.♗xe5, where Steinitz tried, unsuccessfully, to squeeze water out of stone, the result being +1, -1, =3.

So, on 17 March 1886, the 16th game of the historic match took place.

## Game 2

 Steinitz, William  
 Zukertort, Johannes Hermann  
 USA 1886

**1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♙b5 ♗f6**

And here Steinitz modestly advanced his queen's pawn one step forward:

## 4. d3!

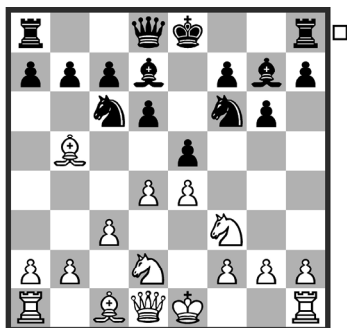
Now the opening duel drifts more towards a strategical battle. White does not search for the fictional first-player advantage in the forced lines that oversimplify the position, and, in an effort to keep some tension in the position, enters a multi-piece middlegame.

**4... d6 5. c3 g6 6. d4**



As we can see, Steinitz preferred to hold back with this advance until later.

6... ♖d7 7. ♘bd2 ♙g7

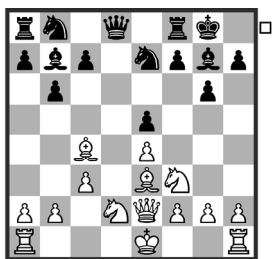


Position after: 7... ♙g7

### 8. dxe5

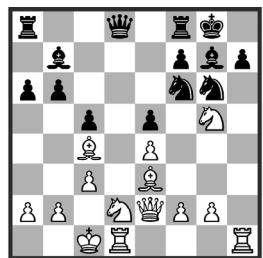
Typical Steinitz! In this way, by closing the h8-a1 diagonal, the first world champion fought against Black's fianchettoed bishop in a wide variety of openings.

For example, the famous game Steinitz – Mongrelien (London 1863) developed as follows: 1. e4 g6 2. d4 ♙g7 3. c3 b6 4. ♙e3 ♙b7 5. ♘d2 d6 6. ♘gf3 e5 7. dxe5! dxe5 8. ♙c4 ♘e7 9. ♚e2 0-0



Position after: 9... 0-0

10. h4! Steinitz's signature flank attack having stabilized the position in the center. 10... ♘d7 11. h5 c5 12. hxg6 ♘xg6 13. 0-0-0 a6 14. ♘g5 ♘f6



Position after: 14... ♘f6

15. ♘xh7! ♘xh7 16. ♖xh7 ♚xh7 17. ♚h5+ ♙g8 18. ♖h1 ♖e8 19. ♚xg6 ♚f6 20. ♙xf7+! ♚xf7 21. ♖h8+! ♙xh8 22. ♚xf7 and Black resigned (1-0).

8... ♘xe5 9. ♘xe5 dxe5 10. ♚e2

Note that the white pawns on e4 and c3 will safely cover the central squares and prevent the enemy pieces from invading.

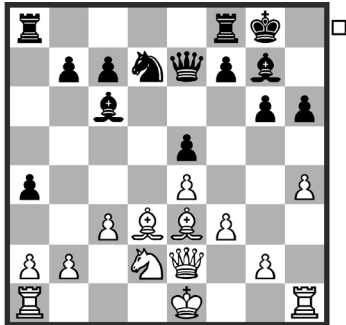
10... 0-0 11. ♙d3 ♚e7 12. f3 ♙c6

It was better to put the bishop on e6.

13. ♘b3 a5 14. ♙e3 ♘d7 15. h4

White, who has a strong position in the center, prepares a systematic attack on the kingside. In such cases, Steinitz would often send his monarch to the queenside or even leave it in the center of the board.

15... a4 16. ♘d2 h6

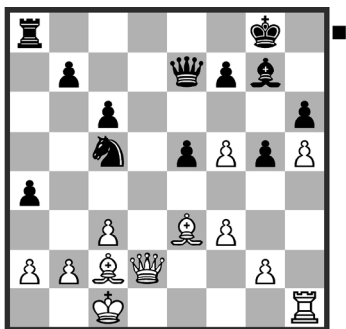


Position after: 16... h6

17. h5 g5 18. ♘f1

Having exposed the light-squared holes on the kingside, White directs his knight to the f5-square.

18... ♘c5 19. ♙c2 ♖fd8 20. ♘g3  
 ♙d7 21. 0-0-0 c6 22. ♖d2 ♙e6 23.  
 ♘f5 ♙xf5 24. exf5 ♖xd2 25. ♙xd2



Position after: 25. ♙xd2

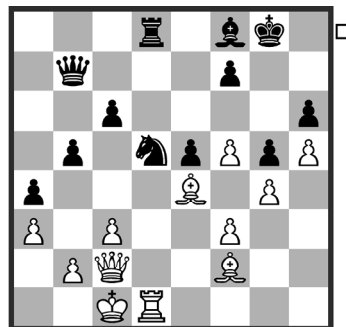
25... ♘d7

Too passive. Black had a chance to liberate his g7-bishop with 25... e4! which would have given him counterplay.

26. g4 ♘f6 27. ♙e4 ♖d8

Black has managed to strengthen the position of his king, but now Steinitz, using the increased mobility of his bishops, transfers the play to the opposite flank.

28. ♙c2 ♘d5 29. ♙f2 b5 30. a3 ♙f8  
 31. ♖d1 ♙b7



Position after: 31... ♙b7

32. c4!

Smashing open the opponent's queenside. Steinitz does not mind opening lines against his own king because Black is not able to create threats against it, and the weak pawns on a4 and c6 will soon fall like ripe apples from a tree.

32... bxc4 33. ♙xc4 ♖b8 34. ♖d2  
 ♘b6 35. ♙c3 ♘d5 36. ♙c4 ♘b6 37.  
 ♙d3 ♙e7 38. ♖c2 ♘d5 39. ♙c4

(see diagram next page)

39... ♙xa3