

Victor Bologan

The Powerful Catalan

A Complete Repertoire for White

New In Chess 2012

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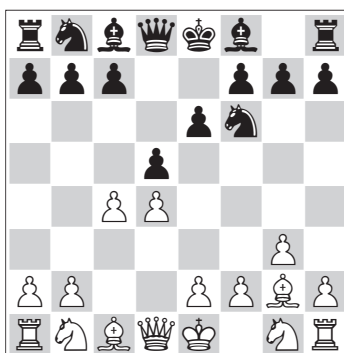
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From the author

To start my story, I will jump to that contemporary, all-knowing oracle that is Wikipedia:

'The Catalan Opening – a chess opening, beginning with the moves **1.d2-d4** ♖g8-f6 **2.c2-c4** e7-e6 **3.g2-g3** d7-d5 **4.♗f1-g2**



It is one of the closed openings, and obtained its name thanks to the 1929 tournament in Barcelona, Spain (Catalonia), when it was used by Tartakower’.

This is pretty much a unique thing in chess history – we know not only the date of birth of a new opening system, but also its place of birth and its father! The tournament organisers wished to engrave the name of their home state of Catalonia on the minds and hearts of chess players, and they suggested the players have a competition to invent a new, original opening. The winner was the inventive Savielly Tartakower (he was also the originator of the Orang-Utan Opening 1.b4): three times he used the system with d2-d4 in combination with g2-g3, which obtained a special prize and was awarded the name Catalan Opening.

The solid new opening quickly became popular. One need only point out that was soon included in their repertoires by Capablanca and Alekhine, Botvinnik and Keres, Reshevsky and Flohr. Later, it was used by almost all the chess elite, including the majority of world champions. A great deal was done for the development of the opening by Karpov, Kasparov, Kramnik, Kortchnoi, Gelfand, Razuvaev, Sosenko, Tkachiev...

We should say a few words about my relationship with the opening. I can say that, before starting to play the opening myself and teaching it to my pupils, I played for five years for the Catalan club UGA in Barcelona. This was a very pleasant, positive experience, and I even learned a few words of the Catalan language! This shows that Catalonia is very dear to me, and its language is quite similar to Rumanian, which is my mother tongue.

When we speak of the Catalan in chess, we have in mind a strong concept for White, in which he fianchettoes the light-squared bishop and this bishop becomes a very powerful piece. Let us compare this set-up with the King's Indian Defence. There Black also fianchettoes his king's bishop, but White occupies the centre with his pawns, placing them on c4, d4 and e4; but even so, Black obtains full-fledged play.

I would advise you not to think of the Catalan as an independent opening, unconnected with any other. If you wish to build a general repertoire, based on the fianchetto of the king's bishop, then you need to study a whole range of variations with the bishop on g2. This includes g2-g3 against the Benko Gambit, the King's Indian, the Benoni and the Grünfeld. I do not claim that this is the only good way to fight against these openings, but if you have this general conception to meet these systems with a kingside fianchetto, then you will develop a better feel for the positions, the more ideas you are familiar with. This improves your understanding of chess in general, because ideas from one opening can be used in others, and such interconnectedness is very useful.

The material in this book is arranged in the classical way – starting with the rarest variations and moving towards the most popular. But it should be noted that 'rare variations' does not necessarily mean 'bad variations'. For example, in the opening chapters, we look at some variations which arise via other openings, such as the Queen's Indian and Tarrasch Defence. I have included these in the book because they can arise via the Catalan move-order. Black can play ...b7-b6 or ...c7-c5, and the reader will immediately be able to obtain all the information he needs. It would be cheating if we simply referred him to another book. Thus, with this book, you can prepare for the whole spectrum of positions of the Catalan type.

Of course, the most concrete and tactical lines arise after 4...d5xc4. Black takes a pawn, after which he has a mass of possible moves. White must remember the precise reply to all the main moves, because a pawn is a pawn – if you do not manage either to regain it, or to obtain sufficient compensation, then Black will simply have an extra pawn.

One interesting idea for Black is to check on b4 with the bishop, and, in reply to ♗d2, to transfer his bishop to e7 or d6, and place his pawns on c6 and b6 and his other bishop on b7. This is possibly the most solid set-up for Black against the Catalan, but at the same time, it is quite passive. White seizes the centre, after which it is not so easy for Black to obtain full equality.

Black's main idea is to play ...♙e7, ...0-0, and then take on c4. After ♖c2 a6 White can play a2-a4, but there we have a great many variations. In my opinion, from a positional viewpoint, the immediate recapture on c4 is more correct, so as then to try to establish piece control over the centre. An important subtlety in this line is the multi-purpose move ♗d2. First of all, White wants to see how his opponent will reply, and how he will arrange his pieces. If Black brings his knight to c6, then he cannot play ...c7-c5; if he puts it on d7, then White has the possibility of ♗a5; and if he plays ...♙e4, then later on this bishop will come under attack.

In my opinion, the structure of this book is quite precise; I do not believe I have overlooked any important set-ups. For further study of this wonderful opening I would recommend, of course, that you study the games of strong players. For example, you can start with the games of Karpov in this opening. In our day, the best exponent of the Catalan is probably Vladimir Kramnik, who has achieved fantastic results in this opening. I very much like the way he handles the line in games against very strong opponents, who are excellently prepared for the Catalan. Even so, Vladimir manages to find small nuances and outplay his opponents all the same!

Vladislav Tkachiev understands the Catalan wonderfully well, and I love analysing his games with my pupils. I also recommend you study the games of such strong GMs as Alexander Grischuk and Boris Gelfand.

There is one piece of advice that I never tire of repeating: if you use the computer in your preparations, never choose a move solely because the computer recommends it. You must try to understand and explain the move to yourself, understand why this move should be played just now, and why not something else? What are the ideas behind the move, what plan is it following? It is always useful to hold a conversation with yourself, and explain in words what the move intends. In this way, you will master the material better, and in addition, independent analytical work is very important for the development of your chess understanding.

I hope that this book will come to lie at the heart of your opening repertoire, based on the opening move 1.d2-d4. For further study material I can recommend Boris Avrukh's *Grandmaster Repertoire for White with 1.d2-d4*, where many Catalan variations are considered in great detail.

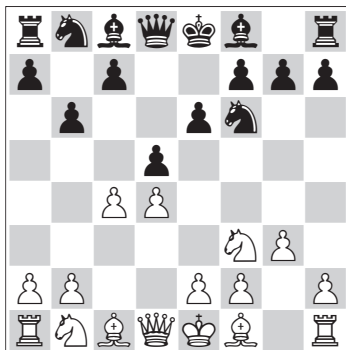
I wish you success in playing the Catalan. It is not essential to have a knowledge of the Catalan language, to play this opening! You only need to know the Catalan 'chess language'.

Victor Bologan
Kishinev, June 2012

Chapter 1 – Queen’s Indian Style

We will begin with a variation which is normally reached via the Queen’s Indian Defence.

1.d2-d4 ♘g8-f6 2.c2-c4 e7-e6 3.♘g1-f3 d7-d5 4.g2-g3 b7-b6



On the board we have a typical Queen’s Indian formation. Black’s only problem is that he has closed the diagonal of his queen’s bishop too early, and White can try to exploit this circumstance.

5. ♖f1-g2 ♗c8-b7
6. 0-0



6. ... ♗f8-e7

Black’s main move in this position.

In reply to 6...dxc4 White continues 7.♖a4+ ♘bd7 8.♗e5 by analogy with the variation 6...♗e7 7.♘c3 dxc4 examined later, and tries to exploit the weakness of c6.

Sometimes the move 6...♗d6 is seen, but the bishop is not very well placed on this square, since it can be attacked with ♘b5 or after e2-e4. And White still gains control of the square e5, for example 7.♘c3 0-0 8.♗e5 ♘bd7 9.♖f4 ♗e4 10.♘xe4 dxe4 11.♖a4 ♗xe5 12.dxe5 ♖e7 13.♖ad1 ♖fd8 14.h4, Dannevig-Tjomsland, Oslo 1998.

Black can also start with 6...♘bd7, in reply to which White exchanges on d5: 7.cxd5 ♘xd5 (after the plain 7...exd5 the bishop on b7 is blocked by its own pawn and White can count on the standard Queen’s Indian advantage) 8.♖e1 (White wants to seize the centre with his pawns, which promises him an advantage) 8...♗b4?! 9.♗g5! (an important intermediate move: the white bishop provokes its opposite number into returning to e7) 9...♗e7 10.e4 (the tactical idea, on

which White's entire play hangs) 10...♙xg5 11.exd5 ♙xd5 12.♘xg5 ♙xg2 (if 12...♗xg5 13.h4 ♗f5 14.g4 ♗f4 15.♙xd5 Black remains a piece down) 13.♘xe6±, and White obtained a significant positional advantage in Ribli-Pomar Salamanca, Buenos Aires 1978.

7. ♘b1-c3

White quietly continues to develop, not worrying about the fate of the pawn on c4.

7. ... 0-0

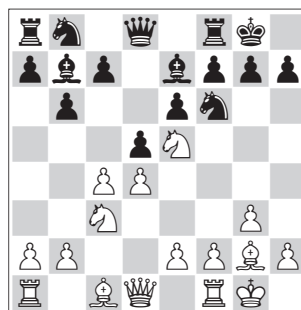
After 7...dxc4?! 8.♗a4+ ♘bd7 9.♘e5! White not only regains the sacrificed pawn, but also obtains control over his opponent's weakened light squares: 9...♙xg2 10.♙xg2 0-0 11.♘c6 ♗e8 12.♗xc4. White is clearly better.

The 'general strengthening move' 7...c6 discloses Black's plans too early, and White now has a large choice of promising continuations. For example, his knight can jump not only forwards, but backwards: 8.♘d2!? (also good is 8.♘e5, after which 8...0-0 transposes to the main variation, whilst after 8...♘fd7 White can simply exchange knights and continue playing in the centre, gradually preparing the thematic advance e2-e4: 9.♘d7 ♘xd7 10.b3 0-0 11.♙f4 ♘f6 12.♗d3 ♗d7 13.♞ad1 ♞ad8 14.♗c2 h6 15.e4 dxe4 16.♘xe4 ♗c8 17.♙e5± Burmakin-Tompa, Zalkaros 1992) 8...0-0 9.e4 ♘a6 (9...dxc4 10.♘xc4 ♙a6 – see the later variation 7...0-0 8.♘e5 c6 9.e4 dxc4 10.♘xc4 ♙a6) 10.e5 ♘d7 11.cxd5 cxd5 12.a3!? (a useful prophylactic move, limiting the opponent's possibilities on the queenside) 12...♘c7 13.♘f3 a5 14.h4 ♙a6 15.♞e1 ♘b5 16.♘e2± Bhat-Tiviakov, Montreal 2009. White has good chances of a

kingside attack, whilst it is not easy for Black to create real counterplay.

8. ♘f3-e5

Exploiting the fact that Black has played ...d7-d5 too early, White pins this pawn and begins a battle for central preponderance.



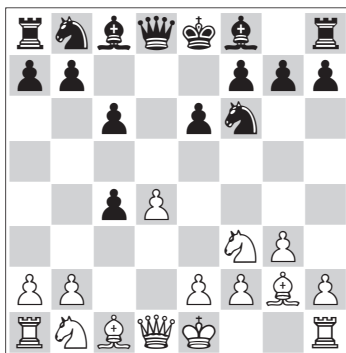
Now Black can choose from:

- A) 8...c5
- B) 8...c6
- C) 8...♘a6
- D) 8...♗c8
- E) 8...♘bd7 (the main continuation)

A) Premature is 8...c5?!, because White is clearly the better prepared for the battle in the centre. For example: 9.dxc5 ♙xc5 (9...bxc5 10.cxd5 exd5 11.♗b3! – the black pawn centre is hanging by a thread – 11...♗b6 12.♘xd5 ♘xd5 13.♙xd5 – Black has no compensation for the pawn, Ugalde Ezcurra-Garcia Martinez, Mislata 2004) 10.♙g5 h6 11.♙xf6 ♗xf6 12.♘d3 ♙d4 13.♞c1 ♘a6 14.cxd5 ♙xc3 15.♞xc3 ♙xd5 16.♙xd5 exd5 (Sanchez Criado-Blanco Fernandez, Spain 2001) 17.♗a4 (17.♗c2!?) 17...♘c5 18.♘xc5 bxc5 19.♞xc5 ♗xb2 20.e3 with clearly the better chances for White;

Chapter 8 – Indirectly Defending the Pawn

1.d2-d4 ♘g8-f6 2.c2-c4 e7-e6 3.♗g1-f3 d7-d5 4.g2-g3 d5xc4
5.♕f1-g2 c7-c6



At first sight, a very modest, unpretentious move, but later this line leads to insane complications.

6. ♗f3-e5!?

I think this is the best try for White. He wants to regain the sacrificed pawn immediately, and if he takes it, then he will definitely have the advantage – in this case, the move ...c7-c6 will lack any particular point, because Black will probably need to prepare the break ...c6-c5. Therefore, Black should immediately take some steps to ensure he does not give up the c4-pawn without a fight.

- A) 6...b5
- B) 6...♕b4+

Black can attack the centre immediately with 6...c5, but this is quite slow and it is not very logical to play ...c7-c6 and then ...c6-c5 on the very next move. Possible then is 7.♗a3 (White simply wants to re-

capture the sacrificed pawn) 7...cxd4 8.♗axc4 ♕c5 9.0-0 ♗bd7 10.♗d3 with very good compensation for the pawn, Rozum-Grigoriants, St Petersburg 2009.

A) 6. ... b7-b5

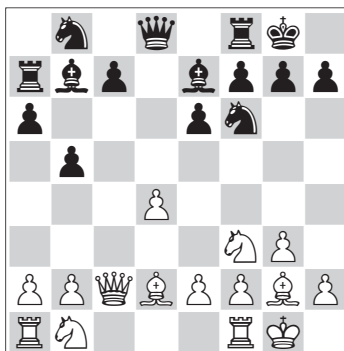


With the idea of keeping the c4-pawn, not worrying about weakening the long diagonal. Now I recommend

7. ♗e5xc6!?

Chapter 15 – Classical Variation 10...♖a7

1.d2-d4 ♘g8-f6 2.c2-c4 e7-e6 3.♘g1-f3 d7-d5 4.g2-g3 ♘f8-e7
 5.♙f1-g2 0-0 6.0-0 d5xc4 7.♚d1-c2 a7-a6 8.♚c2xc4 b7-b5
 9.♚c4-c2 ♘c8-b7 10.♙c1-d2 ♖a8-a7



A rather unusual and cunning move, the analysis of which has cost me a good deal of time. This set-up is beloved of such strong grandmasters as Yakovenko and Grischuk. Black has very aggressive intentions: the essence of his plan is that White cannot prevent the break ...c7-c5. White needs to come up with some newer ideas here, instead of b2-b4. Eventually, I found a path to a small advantage.

- A) 11.♖c1
- B) 11.a3!?

The main continuation here is 12.♚b3 (A2), but we will also look at the alternative continuation 12.♚d1 (A1).

A) A line seen often is

11. ♖f1-c1 ♘b7-e4

- A1) 12.♚d1
- A2) 12.♚b3



A1) 12. ♚c2-d1

This move has not been studied very deeply so far. On the one hand, the queen is not so actively-placed here, but on the other, it pretty much avoids attacks from the enemy pieces.

12. ... ♘b8-d7

Bad is 12...c5 13.dxc5, but it is worth considering 12...♙xf3 13.♙xf3 ♚xd4

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4...♗b4+



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4...dxc4 5.♗g2



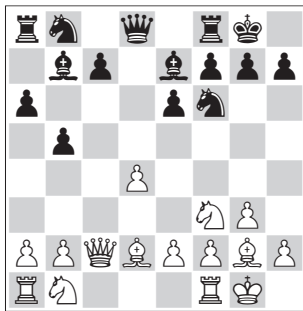
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6...dxc4 7.♖c2 a6 8.♖xc4 b5 9.♖c2 ♗b7 10.♗d2



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