Andrew Martin

play the O'Kelly Sicilian

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About the Author

Andrew Martin is a FIDE Senior Trainer and International Master. He teaches in twelve schools, is an experienced chess writer and has produced numerous chess DVDs.

Also by the Author:
Starting Out: The Sicilian Dragon
First Steps; The Queen's Gambit
First Steps; The King's Indian Defence
Play the Budapest

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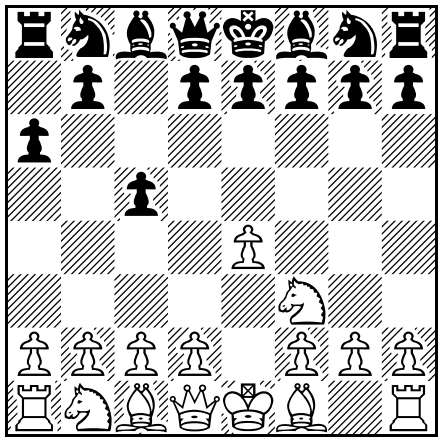
Introduction

For me, the O'Kelly variation, 1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 a6, is one of the last great, relatively unexplored variations of the Sicilian.



Most 1 e4 specialists have ready-made solutions to the Najdorf, Dragon, Sveshnikov and other main lines, but against the O'Kelly I get the impression that players of all levels are not so well prepared. The general view is that White is just a bit better after any of 3 ♘c3, 3 c3 and 3 c4, and the chess world seems to have been content to leave it at that.

I have found that matters are not so simple. If White is caught unprepared then he has his work cut out and even if he is fully prepared, Black has good solutions in all lines. Top grandmasters such as Artemiev have been using the O'Kelly with great success during the pandemic era, cashing in on a direct lack of knowledge. Let me illustrate.

Game 1
H.Grieve-V.Artemiev
Titled Tuesday Blitz 2020

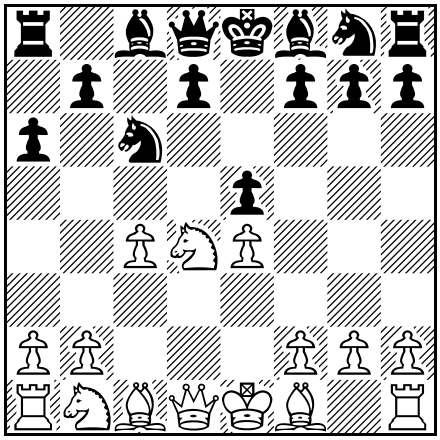
1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 a6 3 c4

This has always been thought as one of the main challenges to the O'Kelly. White tries to strangle counterplay right from the outset. In fact, Black has good choices against this continuation.

3...♘c6 4 d4

We will find that 4 ♘c3 e5! leaves Black with the ready-made plan of ...g6, ...♗g7, ...♘ge7, ...0-0 and then possibly ...f5.

4...cxd4 5 ♘xd4 e5!



A strong, active move, after which positions are reached similar to the Kalashnikov variation. This will be my main line suggestion in the 3 c4 chapter, where I have a back-up line for you as well.

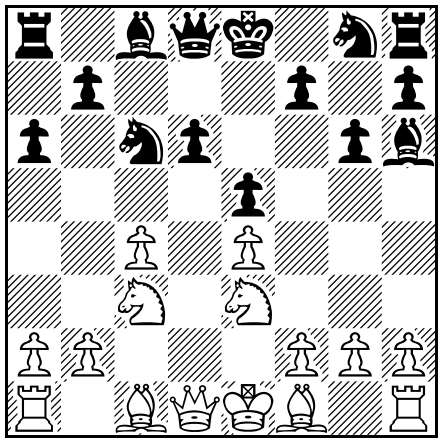
6 ♘f5

This is thought to be the only challenging move.

6...d6

6...d5?! is a bit too aggressive and White obtains the upper hand after 7 cxd5 ♗xf5 8 exf5 ♘d4 9 ♘c3 ♗b4 10 ♗d3 ♕xd5 11 0-0.

7 ♘c3 g6 8 ♘e3 ♗h6!



This is an idea which has been around for a while without a great deal of attention being focused on it. Recently, it has come into fashion. Black simply exchanges off his 'bad' dark-squared bishop.

9 ♗e2 ♘ge7 10 0-0 0-0 11 ♕d3 ♘d4 12 ♘cd5

Grieve sticks to basic development, which does not get him anywhere. Meanwhile, Artemiev can set up a position which could have come directly from the Kalashnikov (1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 e5 5 ♘b5 d6 6 c4, etc), and gains a good position.

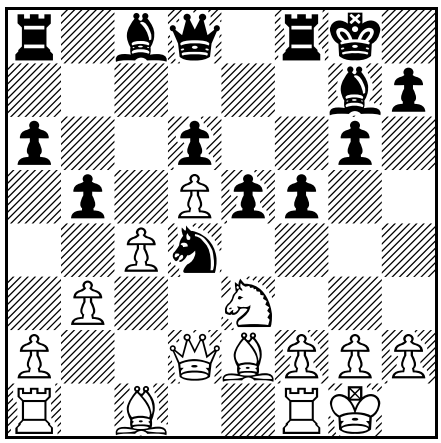
12...♘xd5 13 exd5

13 ♘xd5 ♗xc1 14 ♖axc1 ♗e6 15 ♕d2 ♖c8 also leaves Black with a very comfortable game.

13...♗g7

He could also have considered 13...f5!, with which I see nothing at all wrong.

14 ♕d2 b5 15 b3 f5



Black has taken the initiative on both sides of the board.

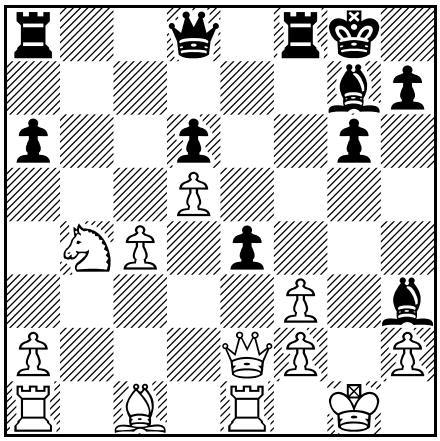
16 ♘c2 ♘xe2+ 17 ♕xe2 bxc4 18 bxc4 f4!

The position is turning out badly for White.

19 ♘b4

If White tries to block the coming attack, he will find that Black's activity cannot be quelled: 19 f3 ♗f5! 20 ♖b1 (or 20 ♖f2 ♖b8 21 ♗a3 e4, which simply had to come, and if 22 ♖e1 e3) 20...♕a5 and White is losing.

19...f3! 20 gxf3 ♗h3 21 ♖e1 e4!



This style of attack is usually the province of the Sveshnikov player.

22 ♖b1 ♗c3 23 ♗d2 ♕h4

Carnage, and now 24 ♕xe4 ♕xe4 25 ♖xe4 ♗xd2 would win cleanly.

24 fxe4 ♗xd2 25 ♕xd2 ♕g4+ 0-1

A crushing win for Black. Here we saw the O'Kelly in a Sveshnikov disguise, and we are going to see other transpositional devices as we go through the book. White can sometimes be tricked into an opening he might not be ready for.

The pandemic era has been full of rapid, blitz and even bullet chess, played almost exclusively online. In this climate, the surprise opening weapon is king. Top players have been starting to use the O'Kelly to throw the opponent off balance, with Artemiev at the cutting edge.

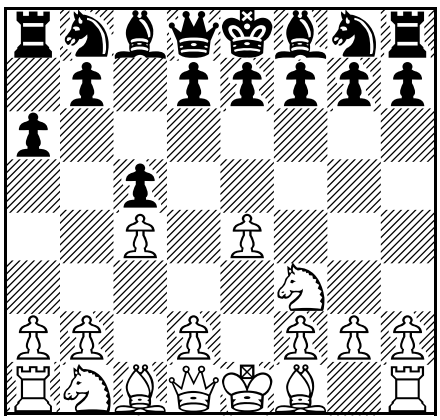
We are just coming out of the bubble as I write. It will be fascinating to see whether this growth in popularity continues or whether the O'Kelly will only be a very rare guest in classical chess events and resumes an offbeat role.

Welcome to the book. I hope it will be an interesting journey.

Andrew Martin,
Bramley, January 2022

Chapter Five
Seizing Space: 3 c4

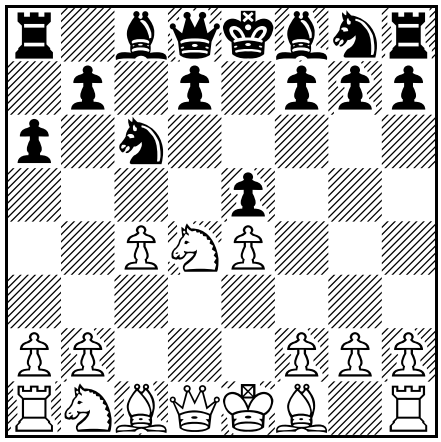
1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 a6 3 c4



3 c4 is supposed to one of the best ways for White to meet the O'Kelly. A central bind is established, making it difficult for Black to break out. Clearly, Black can go into a Hedgehog-like position after 3...e6 and this may well transpose into the Kan variation, but I am going to suggest an active and aggressive response, which is more in keeping with the unorthodox and varied nature of O'Kelly positions. After that, we will take a look at an unexpected back-up response, which may be used to surprise.

Game 85
A.Karpov-M.Taimanov
Leningrad 1977

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 a6 5 c4 e5!



This will be my main recommendation against 3 c4. I will go so far as to say it may take away a lot of white interest in this line. We begin with one of the most famous black victories.

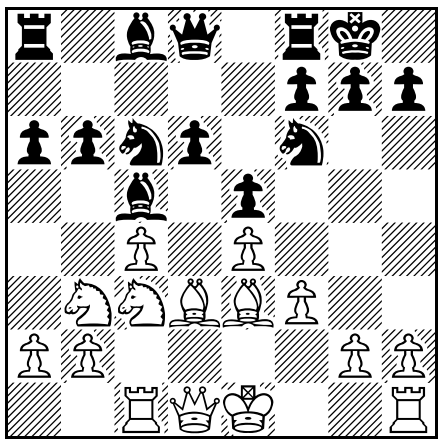
6 ♘b3?!

A passive square for the knight, the only benefit of which is to prevent Black from playing ...♗c5. Despite this, Black can continue aggressively.

6...♘f6 7 ♘c3

7 ♗d3 ♗b4+ 8 ♗d2 does not discomfort Black: 8...♗xd2+ 9 ♕xd2 0-0 10 ♘c3 d6 11 0-0 ♗e6 and Black is fine. If White tries to target d6, here is what might happen: 12 ♖fd1 ♕b6! 13 ♖ac1 ♖ac8 14 ♗f1 ♖fd8. White has the worse bishop and Black has all bases covered.

7...♗b4! 8 f3 0-0 9 ♗e3 d6 10 ♖c1 b6 11 ♗d3 ♗c5!



In a level position, Taimanov concentrates on dark-squared control. The d4-square seems ripe for occupation at some point.

12 ♕d2 ♗e6 13 ♘xc5 bxc5 14 0-0 ♘d4 15 ♘d5 ♘d7

15...♖b8 16 b3 ♗xd5 17 exd5 ♘h5! also seems sensible, with the idea of ...f5.

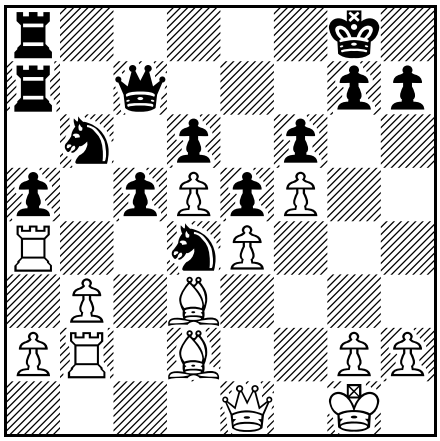
16 f4

16 b4 might be answered by 16...♖b8 17 bxc5 dxc5 (or 17...♘xc5!? 18 ♖fd1 ♗xd5 19 cxd5 ♕f6) 18 ♖b1 h6 with approximate equality.

16...♖b8 17 f5 ♗xd5 18 cxd5 ♕b6 19 ♖f2 f6 20 ♖c4 a5

Continuing to batten down the hatches on the dark squares.

21 ♖a4 ♖a8 22 ♕e1 ♖a7 23 b3 ♖fa8 24 ♖b2 ♕c7 25 ♗d2 ♘b6!



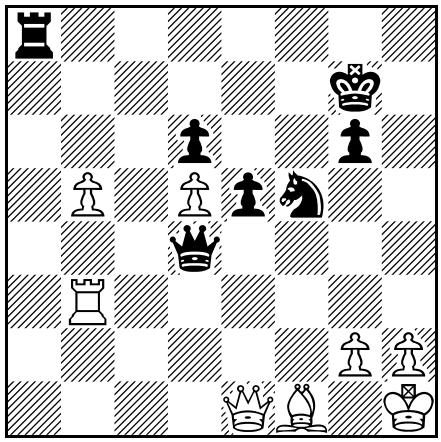
26 ♖xa5

26 ♗xa5? ♘xa4 27 ♗xc7 ♘xb2 was Taimanov's clever point.

26...c4! 27 ♗f1

The alternatives would suggest that Karpov found the only move: 27 ♖xa7 ♕xa7 is no good for White at all. Meanwhile 27 ♗b1 ♖c8 28 ♖xa7 ♕xa7 29 ♔h1 ♕a3 30 ♗c3 cxb3 31 axb3 ♘b5 32 ♖a2 ♕xb3 leaves Black extraordinarily active.

27...♖xa5 28 ♗xa5 ♕c5 29 ♗xb6 ♕xb6 30 ♔h1 cxb3 31 axb3 g6 32 fxg6 hxg6 33 b4 ♔g7 34 b5 f5 35 exf5 ♘xf5 36 ♖b3 ♕d4



The scene is set for a famous finish.

37 b6??

37 ♖b1 ♖b8 38 h3 ♕xd5 would probably have led to a draw.

37...♖a1 38 ♖b1 ♘g3+! 0-1

A very nice move. If 39 hxg3 ♖a8! decides. Black does not experience any difficulties after 6 ♘b3.

Game 86
M.Socko-N.Dzagnidze
European Women's Team Championship, Reykjavik 2015

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 a6 3 c4

Many players try 3 c4 because they have read that it is good for White somewhere without any precise knowledge about how to continue. In general, Maroczy Bind positions are relatively easy to play once you have set up the bind. Well, not here, as Black will ask precise questions early in the game. Throughout the course of this game, the experienced Monika Socko seems uncomfortable, maybe due to the opening choice.

3...♘c6 4 d4 cxd4 5 ♘xd4 e5 6 ♘b3 ♘f6 7 ♘c3 ♗b4 8 ♗d3

Socko tries to improve on Karpov's play by developing a piece. Although 8 ♗d3 may be slightly better than 8 f3, it does not change the evaluation of the position. Black is comfortable.

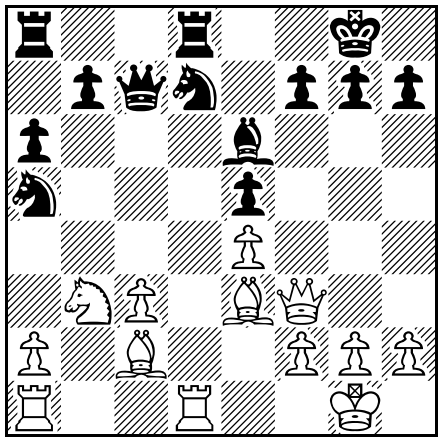
8...d6 9 0-0

9 ♗d2 0-0 10 0-0 ♗e6 11 ♘d5 ♗xd2 12 ♕xd2 a5! sees Black starting to set up the dark-square barricade typical of this variation.

9...♗xc3! 10 bxc3 0-0 11 c5 ♗e6

11...d5 is also pretty good.

12 cxd6 ♕xd6 13 ♗e3 ♖fd8 14 ♗c2 ♕c7 15 ♕f3 ♘d7 16 ♖fd1 ♘a5



All very fluid for Black, who has a target on c3 to aim at. White's bishop-pair does not compensate.

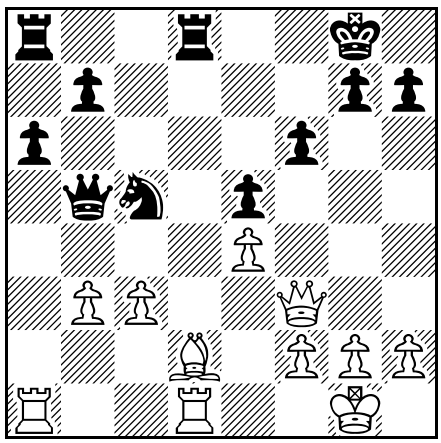
17 ♘xa5 ♕xa5 18 ♗g5 f6 19 ♗b3 ♘c5

In view of White's improvement on the next move, Black could consider 19...♗xb3! 20 axb3 ♕c7 21 ♗d2 ♘c5 22 b4 ♘d3 instead.

20 ♗d2?

Socko should have seized the opportunity to play 20 ♕g4!, which I think is forcing enough to hold the draw: 20...♔f7 21 ♕h5+ ♔g8 22 ♕g4, etc.

20...♗xb3 21 axb3 ♕b5!



Leaving the white position on the verge of falling apart.

22 ♗e3

22 b4 ♘b3 23 ♖a2 ♖d3 24 ♕g4 f5!! puts White to sleep: 25 ♕xf5 (or 25 exf5 ♖ad8 26 f6

♕d7 27 ♕g5 h6 28 ♕xe5 ♖e8) 25...♕c4! 26 ♕xe5 ♖ad8 and Black has a decisive advantage.

22...♘xb3 23 ♖ab1 ♕c4 24 ♖d5 ♕xc3 25 ♕d1 ♘d4 26 ♗xd4 exd4 27 ♖xb7

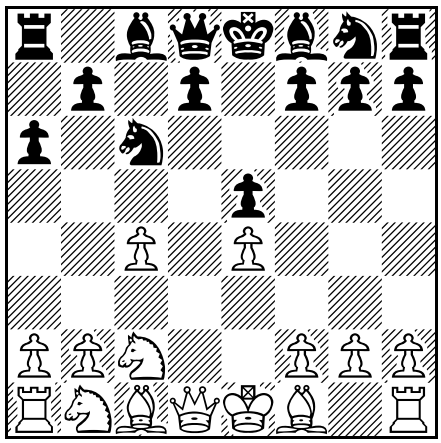
27 ♖c1 ♕a3 28 ♖a1 ♕e7 29 ♕xd4 would have prolonged resistance.

27...♖xd5 28 exd5 ♖e8 29 ♖b1 d3 30 g3 d2 31 ♕a4 ♖e1+ 32 ♔g2 ♕e5 33 ♕a2 ♕e4+ 0-1

We can say that 6 ♘b3 is not White's best option.

Game 87
K.Karaoglan-V.Bernadskiy
Novi Sad 2021

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 a6 3 c4 ♘c6 4 d4 cxd4 5 ♘xd4 e5 6 ♘c2

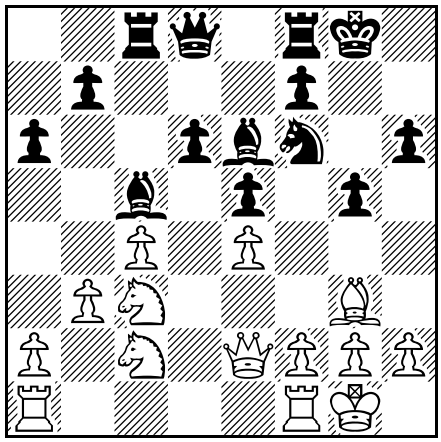


Let's look at the positives:

1) White avoids exchanges.
2) ...♗b4 is dissuaded.
3) If Black plays ...♗c5, White can challenge the active bishop with ♗e3.

But in all other respects 6 ♘c2 is a passive move and does not give Black any difficulty.

6 ♘f3 has been played surprisingly often too, as to me it looks like a loss of time. The knight has now moved three times in the first six moves and does not attack anything. Here we have another variation which Black should not fear. Active play is the order of the day: 6...♗c5! 7 ♘c3 d6 8 ♗e2 ♘f6 9 0-0 0-0 10 ♗g5 h6 11 ♗h4 ♗e6 12 ♘e1?! (12 ♖c1 maintains a level game) 12...g5! 13 ♗g3 ♘d4 (control and safe occupation of the central dark squares is a key theme for Black running through the whole variation) 14 ♘c2 ♘xe2+ 15 ♕xe2 ♖c8 16 b3.



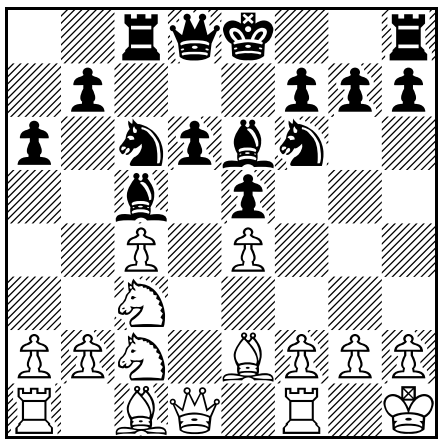
This was E.Homiakova-J.Fries Nielsen, Internet (blitz) 2021, where 16...b5! would have been excellent: 17 cxb5 ♕a5 18 ♕f3 ♔g7 19 ♘d5 (19 bxa6?? ♗a7 picks off a piece) 19...♘xd5! (19...♗xd5 20 exd5 ♕xb5 21 ♘e3 ♕d7 22 ♘c4 is rather unclear) 20 exd5 ♗d7 21 bxa6 ♕xa6 22 a3 f5. The machines do not like this at all for White, who faces an uncomfortable defence.

In short, 6 ♘f3 can be confidently answered by 6...♗c5. We now return to Karaoglan's 6 ♘c2:

6...♗c5!

There is no reason to refuse this active deployment of the bishop.

7 ♘c3 d6 8 ♗e2 ♗e6 9 0-0 ♘f6 10 ♔h1 ♖c8



The opening is nearly over and the middlegame about to begin. Black has felt no pressure at all and once castled, can look for the initiative.

11 b3 ♘d4 12 f4 h6

A good move, taking away ideas of a later ♗g5.

13 h3 0-0 14 ♗d3?!

Maybe he should try 14 f5 ♗d7 15 ♕d3, but it does not feel too promising after 15...♗c6! 16 ♗f3 ♘xf3 17 ♖xf3 b5!.

14...♘xc2! 15 ♕xc2 ♘h5!

It looks like White is going to regret h2-h3.

16 ♘e2 ♗g4!

A easy tactic, but nice at the same time.

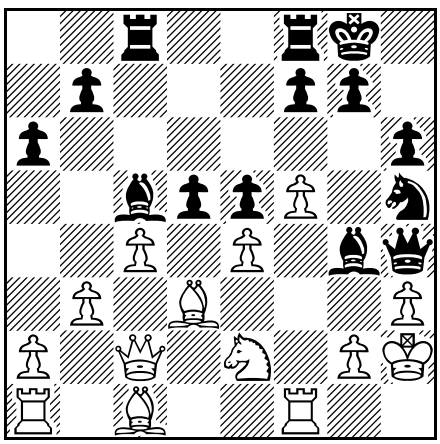
17 ♔h2

Of course, not 17 hxg4? ♕h4 mate.

17...♕h4

The storm clouds have gathered very quickly.

18 f5 d5!



Bernadskiy is right on top of his game.

19 ♗b2

Let's see the tactical details: 19 cxd5 ♗g1+ and 19 exd5 e4! 20 ♗xe4 ♗xe2 21 ♕xe2 ♘g3, winning.

19...dxe4 20 ♗xe4 ♖fd8?!

I am unsure why he does not play 20...♗xe2 21 ♕xe2 ♘g3.

21 ♗xb7

21 ♗c3! ♗xe2 22 ♗e1! would have made it far more difficult for Black.

21...♖c7 22 ♕e4 ♘f6 0-1

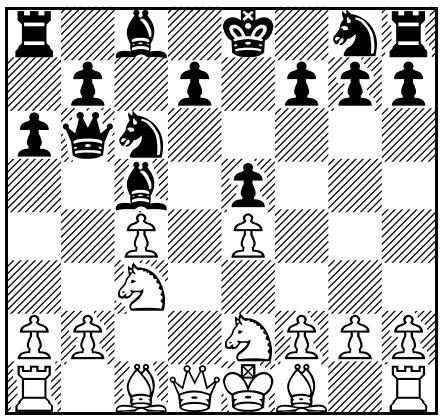
I honestly do not know what the time control was for this game. Until move twenty I would have said relatively slow, but after that play became briefly erratic, albeit still entertaining. That does not overly concern us, as both 6 ♘c2 and 6 ♘f3 can be answered by 6...♗c5, after which Black sets up with something like ...♘f6, ...d6, ...♗e6, ...0-0, ...♖c8 and will enter the middlegame on at least an equal footing

Game 88
A.Afraoui-N.Maisuradze
Brest (blitz) 2020

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 a6 3 c4 ♘c6 4 d4 cxd4 5 ♘xd4 e5 6 ♘xc6

Throughout the Open Sicilian complex, captures such as this are frowned upon, because they strengthen the black centre, giving additional control over d5. White may argue that ...a6 is a wasted move in this type of position, but in general 6 ♘xc6 is unambitious.

There is also 6 ♘e2?!, but I am not sure why anyone would want to play this move. Some have, but not many. The retreat does not really blend in with c2-c4 and White will probably have to spend time soon regrouping the knight. The usual active way will do as Black: 6...♗c5! 7 ♘bc3 ♕b6.



After 8 ♗e3 ♗xe3 9 fxe3 ♘f6 (9...♕xb2 10 ♖b1 ♕a3 11 ♘d5 ♕a5+ 12 ♘ec3 might give White compensation and 9...♕xe3? 10 ♘d5 is not what Black wants at all) 10 ♕d2 0-0 11 ♘d5 ♕d8 12 ♘g3 d6 13 ♗d3 ♘xd5 14 exd5 ♘e7 15 0-0 f5 we have a Sveshnikov-type position on the board. Black seeks kingside chances and White hopes to get his queenside pawns rolling: 16 ♖f2 e4 17 ♗e2 ♕b6 18 ♔h1 ♗d7 19 ♖af1 (if 19 b4 a5!) 19...a5 20 ♗d1 a4 21 ♘e2 ♘g6 22 ♘d4 ♘e5 23 ♗e2 g6 24 b3 axb3 25 axb3 ♖fc8 26 ♕b2 ♕d8 27 ♖c1 ♕g5 28 ♖f4 ♖a7 29 ♕c3 b5 30 ♖ff1 bxc4 31 bxc4 ♖ca8 32 ♖b1 ♖a2 33 ♖fc1 ♘d3 34 ♖c2 ♕xe3 0-1, R.Jun-R.Mitra, Pardubice 2018. We can say that the better player won, which is not always the way of the chessboard, and that 6 ♘e2 poses no threat.

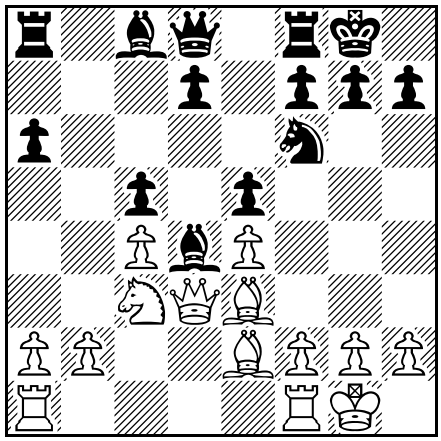
6...bxc6! 7 ♘c3

7 ♗e3 prevents ...♗c5 and should be met by 7...♘f6 8 f3 (or 8 ♘c3 ♗b4 9 ♕d3 0-0 10 ♗e2 d5!) 8...d5! 9 cxd5 cxd5. Note that ...a6 now comes in useful, preventing a check on b5.

7...♗c5

Or maybe 7...♘f6 keeping the option of ...♗f8-b4 available: 8 ♗e2 ♗b4 (or just 8...♗c5 9 0-0 0-0) 9 ♕d3 0-0, in both cases with a nice position for Black.

8 ♗e2 ♘f6 9 0-0 0-0 10 ♕d3 ♗d4 11 ♗e3 c5



Both players can entrench a piece in the middle of the board. The game is equal.

12 ♗xd4 cxd4 13 ♘d1?

This is playing for a loss. White must play 13 ♘d5, keeping equality. Once again we must face the uncomfortable fact that this is a blitz game. Niceties often get overlooked at speed. I always feel a bit uneasy when including such games, but over the last couple of years that is all we have had, and some of them, even parts of them, are relevant and interesting.

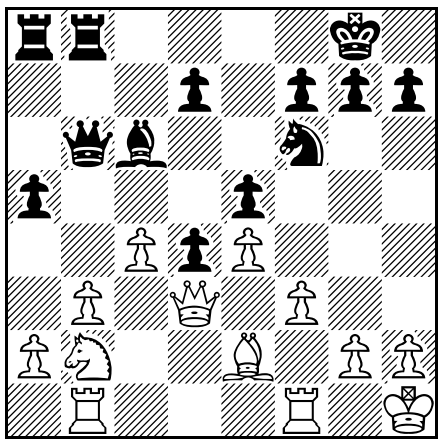
13...♗b7 14 f3 a5!

Keep an eye on this move, restraining the white queenside pawns.

15 b3 ♕b6 16 ♘b2 ♗c6 17 ♔h1

There can be no doubt that Black has pressure.

17...♖fb8 18 ♖ab1



18...♕b4

18...a4! seems correct and if 19 ♘xa4 ♕a7! maintains the advantage.

19 ♕c2 d6 20 ♘d3 ♕b7 21 c5 d5 22 ♘xe5 dxe4

White found a way back into this game and now 23 ♗c4 would have confirmed that. Instead, she blunders.

23 ♘xc6? d3 24 ♕c4 dxe2 25 ♕xe2 ♕xc6 26 fxe4 ♕xe4 27 ♕f2 a4 28 ♖be1 ♕c6

White can now resign with a clear conscience.

29 ♖d1 axb3 30 axb3 ♖d8 31 ♖c1 ♖ab8 32 ♕b2 ♖b5 33 ♕c3 ♖c8 34 b4 ♘d5 35 ♕f3 f6 36 ♖b1 ♖xb4 37 ♖xb4 ♘xb4 38 ♕b3+ ♘d5 39 ♖c1 ♔h8 40 ♕c4 ♘e3 41 ♕d3 ♕xg2 mate

There is nothing in the capture 6 ♘xc6.

On to 6 ♘f5, the only way that White can hope to mount any pressure.

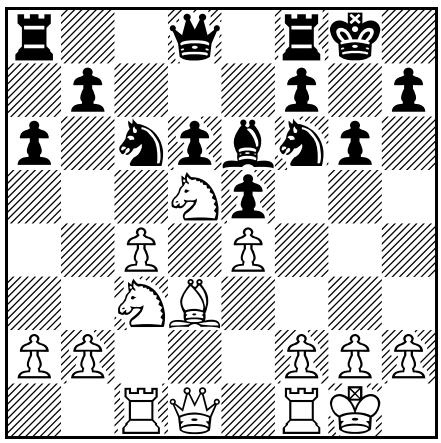
Game 89
P.Shuvalova-V.Kazakovskiy
European Online Championship Qualifier 2020

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 a6 3 c4 ♘c6 4 d4 cxd4 5 ♘xd4 e5 6 ♘f5 d6 7 ♘c3 g6 8 ♘e3 ♗h6

We first encountered 8...♗h6 in the opening game of the book, Grieve-Artemiev. This is not a new twist. It's been around for a while, but has only come to the fore recently. The idea of exchanging off Black's bad bishop has definite appeal. Previously, Black preferred 8...♗g7, but 8...♗h6 is a bit more unorthodox and fully in the spirit of the O'Kelly.

9 ♗e2

Normal chess. 9 ♘ed5 is a common alternative, leading to 9...♗xc1 10 ♖xc1 ♗e6 11 ♗d3 ♘f6 12 0-0 0-0.



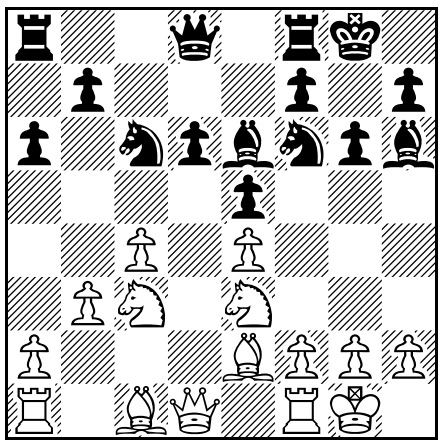
Now:

a) 13 ♘e2 ♖c8 may lead to 14 ♕d2 ♔g7 15 b3 ♕a5 16 ♖fd1 ♕xd2 17 ♖xd2 ♗xd5 18 cxd5 ♘b4 19 ♖xc8 ♖xc8 20 ♗b1 a5 21 a3 ♘a6, R.Zacarias Martinez-V.Kazakovskiy, Internet (blitz) 2021 with a level game, where the black knight is slightly to be preferred over the white bishop. Black won in 78 moves.

b) 13 f4!? (aggressive looking, but it cedes the e5-square) 13...exf4! 14 ♖xf4 (maybe 14 ♘xf4 when White has to consider the consequences of 14...♕b6+ 15 ♔h1 ♕xb2 16 ♘fd5 ♘d7 17 ♖b1 ♕a3 18 ♖xb7 ♘ce5) 14...♗xd5 15 exd5 ♘e5 16 ♗e2 ♘fd7 17 b3 f5 18 ♖f1 ♕g5 was K.Ambartsumova-V.Kazakovskiy, Internet (blitz) 2020. Black is a bit better, as the white bishop is nothing to write home about. Another line where White seems to have been tricked into playing an inferior system against the Sveshnikov or Kalashnikov, but it's hard to pinpoint exactly how and why.

Instead, 9 g3 is somewhat quieter, after which Black may develop in peace: 9...♘f6 10 ♗g2 0-0 11 0-0 ♗e6 12 ♖e1 (after 12 f4 Black should continue calmly with 12...♖c8, and if 13 ♘ed5 exf4 14 gxf4 ♗g7 or 13 f5 ♕b6! 14 fxe6 ♗xe3+ 15 ♗xe3 ♕xe3+ 16 ♔h1 fxe6 17 ♕xd6 ♖ce8) 12...♖c8 13 b3 ♘d4 (covering the potentially weak pawn on d6) 14 ♗b2 b5 15 cxb5 axb5 16 b4 ♕b6 17 h3 ♖c6 18 ♔h2 ♖fc8, F.Perez Ponsa-V.Kazakovskiy, Internet (blitz) 2021. Once again, Black has obtained extremely active play.

9...♗e6 10 0-0 ♘f6 11 b3 0-0



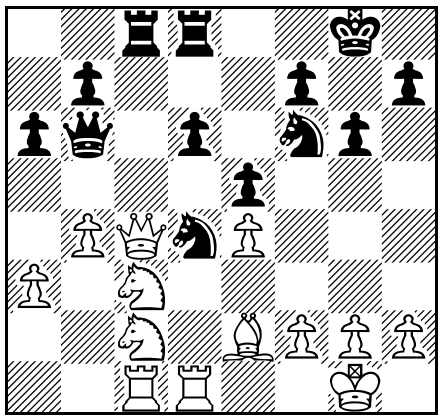
Black's development plan is straightforward and easy to understand.

12 ♘c2 ♗xc1 13 ♖xc1 ♕a5 14 ♕d3 ♖ac8 15 ♖fd1 ♖fd8

With effortless equality. Now d6 is covered and White must be careful that his queenside does not come under fire.

16 a3 ♕b6 17 b4 ♔g7

Rock solid. 17...♗xc4!? 18 ♕xc4 ♘d4 was certainly interesting here, putting White to the test.



She would have to have found 19 ♖xd4! exd4! (and not 19...♖xc4? 20 ♖xc4) 20 ♕xd4 ♕xd4 21 ♘xd4 ♘xe4 22 ♘a2 ♖xc1+ 23 ♘xc1 ♖c8 24 ♘cb3 ♔g7 with an unclear endgame on the board. I would probably put my money on an eventual draw.

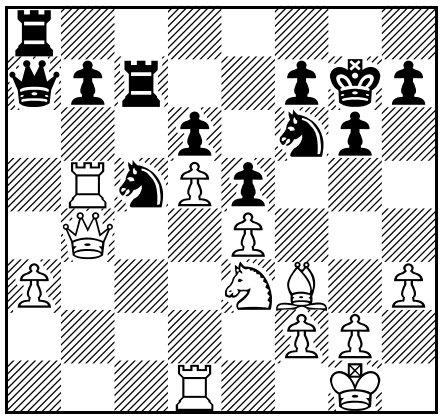
18 h3 a5

Again, 18...♗xc4 is possible.

19 ♘d5 ♗xd5 20 cxd5 ♘b8

This looks like a concession, but the knight will reemerge.

21 ♖b1 ♖c7 22 ♘e3 ♖dc8 23 bxa5 ♕xa5 24 ♖b5 ♕a7 25 ♕b1 ♘bd7 26 ♗f3 ♘c5 27 ♕b4 ♖a8



This is a position which could have come from a Bogo-Indian.

28 ♘c4 ♘cxe4 29 ♘b6 ♘c3 30 ♘xa8 ♕xa8 31 ♖a5

This looks obvious, but is a mistake.

31...♕d8 32 ♖e1 e4 33 ♗xe4

White falters.

33...♘cxe4 34 ♖xe4 ♘xe4 35 ♔h2 ♘c5 36 ♕d4+ ♕f6 0-1