

The Modernized Catalan

Volume I

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The Modernized Catalan

Volume 1

Balázs Csonka

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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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Preface

Writing an opening book is always a challenging endeavor—especially in 2025. How long will the suggested lines remain relevant? Computers may soon refute certain analyses. Tournament practice might uncover more effective continuations. And some lines may simply fall out of fashion. This has been the fate of virtually every chess opening book ever written.

Yet despite these uncertainties, opening books remain both useful and necessary. Why? Because the author plays a crucial role: selecting lines from a vast sea of millions of games, deeply analyzing them, highlighting key moves and variations, explaining underlying ideas, and finally, offering objective evaluations.

In this work by Hungarian International Master Balázs Csonka, all of these tasks—so far as I could assess—have been executed at an impressively high level.

Balázs, now 28 years old, was among the very first students of the renowned Géza Maróczy Chess School in Budapest, founded in 2006. The school quickly proved successful, especially in its early years. Following in the footsteps of Hungarian chess greats such as Géza Maróczy, László Szabó, Gedeon Barcza, and Pál Benkő, many promising young talents emerged from the school. These include names like Benjámín Gledura and Richárd Rapport—who, just days before the release of this book, defeated the reigning World Champion Gukesh.

I vividly remember the distinguished guest lecturers who graced the school: Olympic champions from the 1978 Buenos Aires Chess Olympiad such as Lajos Portisch, Zoltán Ribli, Gyula Sax (who later became Balázs's trainer), and István Csom, as well as world-class players like Judit Polgár, Zsuzsa Polgár, Zsuzsa Verőci, and Mária Ivánka. Our young students had the rare privilege of learning directly from these legends.

Incidentally—and this is now a piece of chess history—the Catalan Opening played a pivotal role in that same 1978 Olympiad. First, Lajos Portisch defeated Bulgaria's top board, Radulov, and then, in the final decisive round, Zoltán Ribli overcame Yugoslavia's Ljubomir Ljubojević—both victories achieved using the same line in the Catalan. The Hungarian tournament book at the time featured an analysis of the Ribli game by Gedeon Barcza, another master of the Catalan.

I myself wrote a small booklet back in 2006 (in Hungarian only) titled *The Power of the Catalan Bishop*. But what Balázs Csonka offers here is a far more comprehensive and modern take. His book is a deep, well-structured, and thoroughly up-to-date exploration of one of the most popular openings in contemporary chess—a weapon favored by numerous World Champions and elite players.

This excellent and sophisticated work not only helps us grasp the fundamental ideas, plans, and tactical motifs of the Catalan but also dives into fresh, cutting-edge computer analysis. It is a valuable contribution to both modern opening theory and the legacy of the Hungarian chess school.

József Horváth,

Grandmaster and FIDE Senior Trainer,
Budapest, April 2025

Introduction

Writing a quality book is a demanding task, especially when it comes to someone's first book. Nevertheless, when my good friend, Daniel Vanheirzeele, offered me the opportunity to write a book for Thinkers Publishing on one of my favourite openings, the Catalan, I didn't hesitate too much. I remember him saying: "It's a big step, but at this young age you can only take big steps." I'm glad I took this step!

The Catalan has historically been considered to be a very safe and sound opening: White plays g3, develops the light-squared bishop to g2 to give extra protection to his king and exert pressure on the long diagonal, where it hopes (and quite often tends) to be better than its counterpart. According to Wikipedia: "The Catalan derives its name from Catalonia, after tournament organizers at the 1929 Barcelona tournament asked Savielly Tartakower to create a new variation in homage to the area's chess history." Even though he used it successfully and many contemporary top players eventually adopted the opening into their repertoire, for decades the Catalan remained in the shadow of 3.♘c3 (after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6) and 3.♘c3 (after 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6), normally leading either to the Nimzo-Indian, Queen's Indian or a classical Queen's Gambit Declined. One noticeable turning point was in 1983, when during the semi-finals of the Candidates tournament both Kasparov and Korchnoi used the Catalan multiple times (see Chapter 7 for more details).

Since then the Catalan has been used by many top grandmasters, but if I had to mention two pioneers, they would be Vladimir Kramnik and Boris Gelfand. The former used it as his main weapon in his victorious World Championship match against Topalov in 2006 (just to mention one significant achievement apart from his many groundbreaking discoveries), while the latter is still producing relevant opening ideas, as you will see throughout the book. Of course, I shouldn't forget to mention that Anand and Carlsen also used the Catalan successfully during their matches in 2010 and 2021 respectively. Over the next few hundred pages, I will also mention some of the "unspoken" heroes of the opening whose games and ideas are certainly worth following.

My personal story with the Catalan started when I came across my childhood trainer's, Horváth József's book: *A katalán futó tűzereje* ("The Catalan bishop's firepower"; Magyar Sakkvilág, 2006). Although that book is more like a magazine than a theoretical work, showing the basic ideas and some classical games, I remember

I was amazed by some of the tactical possibilities (for example see the Introduction to Chapter 9 with some Hungarian roots) and the ease of White's play in general. Even though I was mainly a 1.e4 player as a kid (as most of the peers from my region), I slowly started adding 1.d4 to my repertoire in 2010, with the Catalan being its backbone ever since 2013. Having said that, I would like to take the opportunity to thank József for writing the foreword to my book. One more personal note: during the European Youth Team Championship in 2015 I lost two painful games in a row with Black and, as such, I obviously felt quite depressed. Wondering what I should do the next day, my team captain, Varga Péter (an IM from Hungary) told me: "You should play something with g3 and ♗g2, you play those positions well." Even though I only drew in the next round, (playing the Réti), I will forever remember these words.

If you are reading this book and you aren't a grandmaster (yet), I have great news for you: the Catalan has a notorious reputation at the club level – from Black's perspective! Many players are afraid of the passive positions Black may get into if he plays just one inaccurate move. Yours truly is one of them: I've already tried 8(!) different variations against the Catalan in Classical games, showing that I rarely felt comfortable with Black, even though I have some knowledge from the White side as well. I think I'm not the only one with this sentiment.

Recent years have seen many great publications on the Catalan (or against the Catalan), and as much as I wanted to innovate everywhere, at some point I had to realise that it was simply impossible and that in some lines the best paths had already been worked out. However, I'm still very happy with the work present here, as I've found many important improvements and new directions. Chapter 6 is the most notable of them, but the main lines of Chapter 7, 9 and 10 may also not have seen more than just a dozen games.

Writing an opening book (at least from White's perspective) has changed a lot over the last decade or two. Not so long ago, authors (and players) tried to find an objective advantage everywhere. Nowadays, with modern engines (which have become much stronger over time), we know that it's impossible to prove an advantage anywhere if Black plays the most precise moves in mainstream openings. If there is no advantage at all, I will be honest and I will tell you, I'm not ashamed of it. However, Black needs to get there first! It brings up one important phenomenon of recent opening theory and preparation: as more or less everyone uses the same engines, everyone will see the same "zeros" on the screen. It's the truth, I'm not going to argue with the machine, but it can be very misleading in practice. You should

look under the surface and find the most unpleasant “zeros” for your opponent – those that pose the most practical problems. This is what I aimed for in this book and I hope it will help you a lot.

As such, I wasn't afraid to sacrifice something in order to push Black to the wall if it's the only way to put him under pressure. It would be cool to say that “Activity over Material!” is the main motto of this book, but as opening theory has evolved, Black has found countless dynamic possibilities in every line and the Catalan is no exception, despite the above-mentioned solidity. Therefore, there will be some moments when it's Black who sacrifices something and we are forced on the defensive but, first of all, this is a rare scenario in the book; and secondly I have everything covered, so if it happens and you follow my analysis, there is a good chance that you will eventually emerge on top.

Writing this book took me more than 8 months. Initially it was planned to be just a single volume, but as the material has grown so large, we decided to split it into two parts. The current volume deals with the sidelines on move 4 and all the Open Catalans (4...dxc4), while the other one will cover 4...Bb4, the Closed Catalan (4...Bb4 5.f3 0-0 6.0-0 c6 or 6...Bd7) and the Mainline Catalan (4...Bb4 5.f3 0-0 6.0-0 dxc4). I also did my utmost to explain everything in the best possible manner. I might be too verbose at some point, but I hope you will find all those comparisons helpful.

Just to give you a couple of examples for this decision: opening theory has advanced so much in the last few decades that it's not uncommon that a few variations are analysed until endings, when there are pawns only on one flank (usually on the kingside, 4 vs. 4 or 3 vs. 3). In this book you will find more than a dozen positions where I end my analysis when White has 4 vs. 3 on the kingside with different piece allocations (rook versus rook is the most common, but sometimes more pieces remain on the board!) Another detail that shows the depth of my analysis is Chapter 6: I found a new direction at move 10, a novelty at move 11 and the absolute main line ends on move 44 with perpetual check!

You may say that 8 months is a lot in modern opening theory (and you're right to claim so!), but I made sure that none of the analysis had become outdated and subsequently this book represents the state of theory as of February 26th, 2025. This 8 months gave me a lot of joy, especially when I was able to demonstrate my work, winning two games against the aggressive 4...dxc4 5.f3 Bb4 and another one against the evergreen 4...dxc4 5.f3 a6, where in the absolute main line of the

chapter I introduced a novelty in human play on move 17 and was already winning just 3 moves later. I hope you will be able to use my analysis with the same effect.

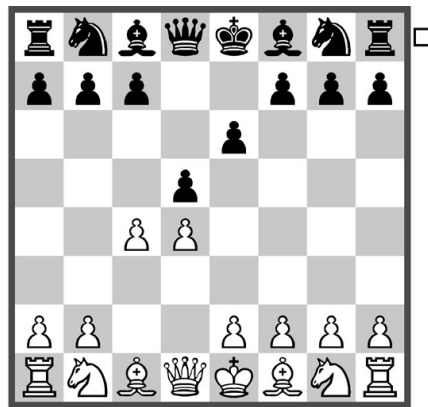
Finally, special thanks goes to my editor Daniel Vanheirzeele for his patience and to my wife, who supported me in times when I thought I would never finish this project. Without them you would likely not be holding this book right now.

Csonka Balázs
Szeged, Hungary
March 2025

Move-Orders Discussion

The starting position of the chapters in this book arises after 1.d4 ♞f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 d5 4.♟g2 (except for the Tarrasch chapter, when I use 1...d5 for move-order purposes). However, there may be slight differences between starting with 1...♞f6 or 1...d5, which I would like to address here.

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6



Position after: 2... e6

3. ♞f3

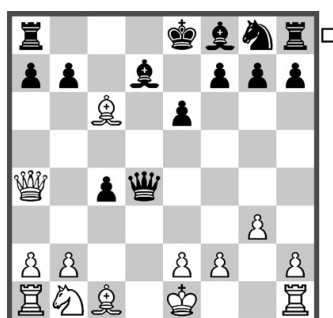
A) The current move order used to be less popular for decades out of Black's fear of the notorious Carlsbad structure arising after 3. ♞c3 ♞f6 4. cxd5 exd5 . However, in the last 10-15 years, Black has found many new resources to make the Exchange Variation more than acceptable for himself, not to mention the evergreen Semi-Tarrasch with 4... ♞xd5 or hypermodern possibilities such as 3...a6!? and 3...h6!?

B) If White wants to reach the "target position" with a bishop on g2 and the knight on g1, he can start with 3. g3 . It was suggested by my friend and former teammate, Juhász Ármin in his book for Thinkers Publishing. However, Black can take advantage of saving a tempo on ♞f6: 3... dxc4! 4. ♟g2 c5 5. ♞f3 ♞c6!



Position after: 5... Nc6!

Black puts pressure on our center immediately. The natural way to deal with it is 6. ♖a4, when Black can proceed with 6... cxd4 [6... ♘d7 7. ♙xc4 ♘f6 would also throw us out of our repertoire – see the Introduction to Chapter 5 for details.] 7. ♗xd4 ♙xc4 8. ♙xc6+ ♘d7!

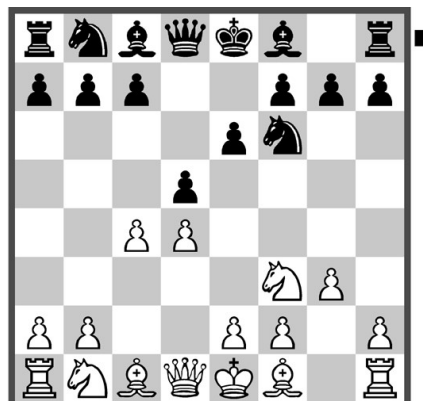


Position after: 8... ♘d7!

With castles and ♗ included ...♘f6, White would have ♙d1!, reaching a slightly better position, but without this option Black is just fine. 9. ♙e3 ♙d6! [9... ♙xc6 10. ♙xc6+ bxc6 11. ♙xd4±] 10. ♙xd7+ ♙xd7 11. ♙xc4 ♘f6=, followed by ...♙c8 and I was able to equalize in Duda – Csonka, Chess.com (blitz) 2023.

3... ♘f6 4. g3

The actual position is almost the same as the one in the next diagram, but White has developed the knight first instead of the bishop. In my proposed repertoire it won't make any difference, as one will follow the other no matter what, but it could be relevant if I were to choose differently.



Position after: 4. g3

4... ♗b4+

Throughout the repertoire I will always answer the early bishops checks (now or after 4...dxc4) with ♘d2. The reason for this (partly) is that after

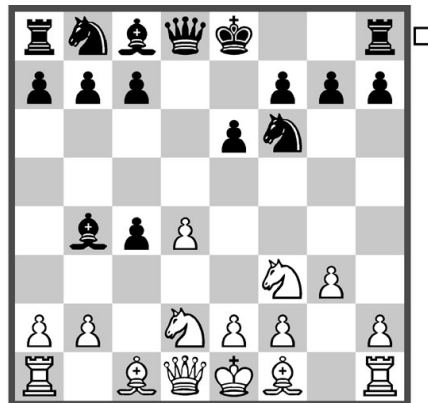
4... dxc4 5. ♔a4+?!



Position after: 5. ♔a4+?!

This is entirely harmless without the bishop on g2. [5. ♗g2 will be our move.] 5... ♘bd7 [5... ♗d7!? 6. ♔xc4 c5! 7. dxc5 ♗c6 is also possible, followed by ♘bd7 and ...♖c8.] 6. ♔xc4 [6. ♗g2 a6 7. ♘c3 ♖b8 8. ♔xc4 b5 doesn't change too much. The knight can end up misplaced whenever White tries to undermine the queenside with a4 and Black replies with ...b4.] 6... a6= Without Caruana's invention, White cannot prevent ...b5, ...♗b7 and ...c5, therefore Black equalises without the slightest of problems.

5. ♘bd2 dxc4!



Position after: 5... dxc4!

6. ♔a4 doesn't win a piece and following:

6. ♙g2 b5 7. 0-0

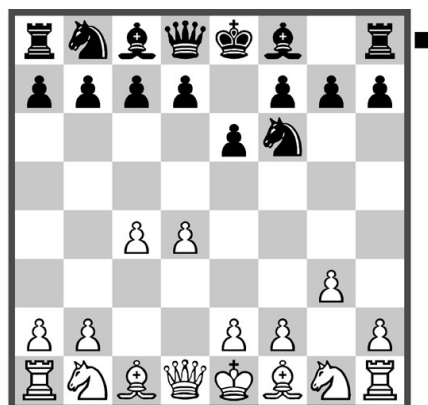
7. a3!? is a rare try that may become more popular in the future.

7... 0-0

I wasn't 100% sure about White's compensation. This is covered in great detail in Swiercz's book for Thinkers Publishing. Black can also play 7... a5!? but not 7... ♙b7?! 8. ♘xc4! bxc4 9. ♔a4+ ♘c6 10. ♘e5 ♘d5 11. ♘xc6 ♔d7 12. ♙xd5 exd5 13. ♔xb4±

Now, let's move to the move-order in our chapters.

1. d4 ♘f6 2. c4 e6 3. g3



Position after: 3. g3

With this move White signals his intention for the Catalan.

A) After 3. Nc3 Black isn't forced to enter the Carlsbad structure, but can also play 3... Bb4 . The Nimzo-Indian is arguably the most solid opening in the history of chess.

B) White can also reach the Catalan with 3. Nf3 , intending to meet 3...d5 with 4.g3. However, this allows the Queen's Indian with 3... b6, the "sibling" of the Nimzo.

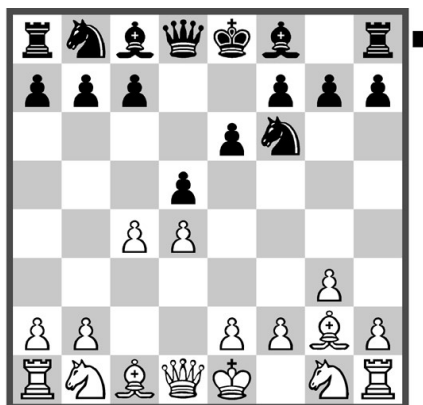
3... d5

A) If Black is hell-bent on the Queen's Indian Defense, he may play 3... b6?! , but after 4. Bg2 d5 5. cxd5! , we reach a favourable version of it. See Chapter 2, Line A for details.

B) Another appeal of starting with 3.g3 is that following 3... Bb4+ 4. Bd2 , White can reserve some options after Bg2 to develop with e3 or e4 and Ne2 , to restrict Black's option in the Bogo – Indian.

C) However, in chess it's very rare that you can avoid something without allowing something else and this case is no exception. After 3.g3 the reply 3... c5 becomes a more appealing option, as the g3 line has long been known to be among the less-critical setups against the Benoni. This possibility is outside the scope of this book, but based on my experience, I would say that you're more likely to face 3. Nf3 b6 than 3.g3 c5. It's your choice.

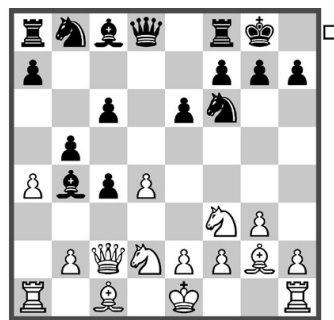
4. Bg2



Position after: 4. Bg2

4... dxc4

4... ♖b4+ 5. ♘d2!? In this version 5...dxc4?? loses to 6. ♔a4, while after 5... 0-0 6. ♘gf3 dxc4, White can delay castling and recover the pawn with 7. ♔c2. Of course, the line only starts here and Black has many decent options, but suffice to say that I would have been happy to recommend this direction, if not for the move-order issue with 1...d5 (see above). One nice detail in this particular position is that 7... b5?! fails to 8. a4 c6?



Position after: 8... c6?

[8... bxa4±] 9. axb5 cxb5 10. ♘g5! h6 11. h4!+-

Apart from 5. ♘f3, which is clearly our main move, I thought about including a "bonus chapter" on:

5. ♔a4+!?

First of all, I was put off by the move-order issue (we cannot play this way against 1...d5). Secondly, after:

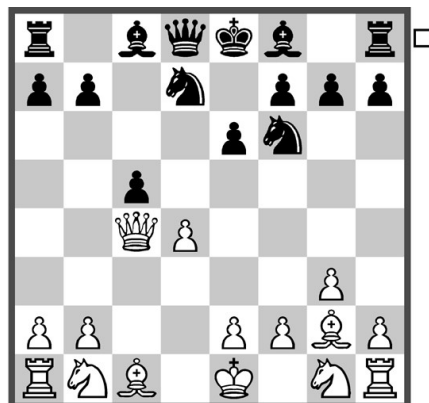
5... ♘bd7

Even here Black can try 5... ♖d7!? 6. ♔xc4 c5! ...followed by ♖c6, as 7. ♖xb7 ♘c6!↑ is rather dangerous for the first player.

6. ♔xc4

Black can start with:

6... c5!



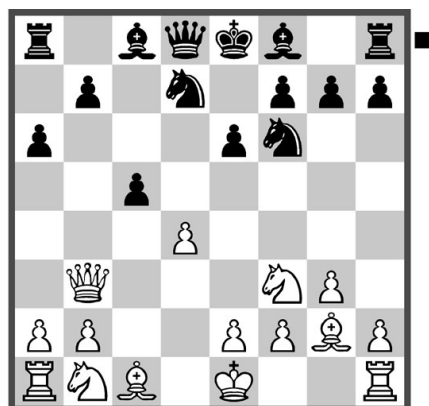
Position after: 6... c5!

This is proposed by Castellanos, and Kuljasevic in his newer work.

My initial motivation to include this extra chapter was based on Caruana's 6... a6 7. ♖e3!, stopping ...c5 or at least making it more difficult to achieve. Once again, the theory is only about to begin here, but Black's difficulties were well demonstrated (in the stem game Caruana-Anand, Batumi 2018 and Nepomniachtchi-Alekseenko, Yekaterinburg 2021) if he cannot achieve the desired pawn break quickly.

Following:

7. ♘f3 a6! 8. ♙b3!?



Position after: 8. ♙b3!?

8. ♙c2 b5! 9. ♘e5 ♘d5= is known to be okay for Black since Giri-Anand, Wijk aan Zee 2018.

8... cxd4! 9. ♘xd4 ♘c5 10. ♙e3 ♘d5 11. ♙d2 b5! 12. ♘c3 ♖b7 13. ♘xd5 ♖xd5 14. ♘c6!