The Italian Renaissance II

The Main Lines

By

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When I was taken to a chess school as a child, the instructors taught me to play 1.e4 with White and to reply with 1...e5. It was just a few years ago that I embraced some other moves, but at the same time I have never abandoned the moves of the king’s pawns.

Over the past few years I have spent a fair amount of time studying the Italian Game while playing it for both colours. As a result I have accumulated a large quantity of analysis which forms the basis of this book. Practically all the variations have been examined afresh, and some have been corrected thanks to the increased power of present-day computers.

Notwithstanding its great popularity, the Italian Game still contains plenty of life and scope for new ideas. This has to do with the fact that in quiet positions there is rarely a single strongest move – usually there will be a few moves of approximately equal worth. Moreover, mastering all the nuances and different move-orders is a highly complex affair. In consequence I have succeeded in finding one or two new ideas or improvements in virtually every line.

I made the decision to write in Russian, as the Italian Game is often about understanding ideas as well as knowing the precise moves. I felt I could communicate these ideas more clearly in Russian, then the excellent translator John Sugden expressed them in English, for which I thank him.

This book is the second volume of my work about 1.e4 e5. The first volume covered 2.♘c4 and also 2.♗f3 ♘f6 – the Petroff Defence. In this volume the starting point is 1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♘c6 3.♘c4 – the Italian Game. I will give more details about the content of this book in the Introduction that follows. Together the two volumes combine to give White confidence in meeting 1.e4 e5 and having flexibility in which move order to use, even from move 2.

This book will be of use to chessplayers of any level; nobody, after all, will say no to obtaining a good position out of the opening. Possibly the book will be no less useful to those who play the Italian Game with the black pieces, seeing that practically all defences to the Italian are examined, and I will offer improvements and novelties even for Black.

I have tried to assess the positions objectively, and not to conceal any strong moves for the sake of showing White’s ideas in a favourable light; in such cases I consider it better to acknowledge candidly that if the opponent finds one or two accurate moves he will manage to reach a normal position. For all that, White often does succeed in securing a plus, even if only a small one; the suggested ideas for the white side appear highly promising.
I think this book serves as further confirmation that chess is still a long way away from the “draw death”, and that, despite all the accumulated knowledge and technical progress, the game still offers ample scope for new ideas and continued study.

Martyn Kravtsiv
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Chapter 4

8...a5

Variation Index

1.e4 e5 2.d3 f6 3.c4 c5 4.c3 f6 5.d3 0–0 6.0–0 d5 7.exd5 cxd5 8.a4 a5

A) 9.e1

B) 9.bd2! b6 10.b5 d6 11.e1

B1) 11...a7

B2) 11...g4

B21) 12.h3

B22) 12.e4! a7 13.h5 d4 xb5 15.axb5

B221) 15...f6

B222) 15...exd4
1.e4 e5 2.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{f3}}} \) \( \text{\textit{\textbf{c6}}} \) 3.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{e4}}} \) \( \text{\textit{\textbf{c5}}} \) 4.c3 \( \text{\textit{\textbf{g6}}} \) 5.d3 0–0 6.0–0 d5 7.exd5 \( \text{\textit{\textbf{d5}}} \) 8.a4 a5

This usually leads to the same position as 9.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{bd2}}} \), but Black has an interesting extra possibility.

9...\( \text{\textit{\textbf{b6}}}?! \)

With 9...\( \text{\textit{\textbf{g4}}} \) 10.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{bd2}}} \) \( \text{\textit{\textbf{b6}}} \) 11.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{b5}}} \) \( \text{\textit{\textbf{d6}}} \), variation B2 is reached.

10.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{b5}}} \)

Or 10.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{g5}}} \) \( \text{\textit{\textbf{d6}}} \) 11.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{b5}}} \) \( \text{\textit{\textbf{f6}}} \) 12.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{h4}}} \) \( \text{\textit{\textbf{f5}}} \).

10...f6 11.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{bd2}}} \) \( \text{\textit{\textbf{a7}}} \)

Vidit – Piorun, Batumi 2018, saw 11...\( \text{\textit{\textbf{g4}}} \) 12.h3 \( \text{\textit{\textbf{h5}}} \) 13.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{c4}}} \) \( \text{\textit{\textbf{d6}}} \) 14.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{g3}}} \) with a slight edge for White. He should meet 14...\( \text{\textit{\textbf{f7}}} \) with 15.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{h4}}} \).

12.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{b3}}}?! \)

Harikrishna – Shirov, St Petersburg 2018, went: 12.d4 \( \text{\textit{\textbf{exd4}}} \) 13.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{e4}}} \) \( \text{\textit{\textbf{xb5}}} \) 14.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{xc5}}} \) (14.axb5 \( \text{\textit{\textbf{d6}}} =) \) 14...\( \text{\textit{\textbf{d5}}} \). With the aid of this intermediate move, Black prevents White from seizing the initiative.

12...\( \text{\textit{\textbf{e7}}} \)

After 12...\( \text{\textit{\textbf{xb5}}} \) 13.axb5\( \text{\textit{\textbf{\mp}}} \) Black still loses his a5-pawn.

13.\( \text{\textit{\textbf{xa5}}} \) c5\( \text{\textit{\textbf{\mp}}} \)

With a complex, obscure position. Of course most players are unlikely to know about this
possibility, but it’s nonetheless simpler to play 9..bd2 rather than 9.e1.

B) 9. bd2!

B1) 9... b6 10. b5 d6

Alternatively:

a) 10... g4 11. e1 d6 12. e4 transposes to variation B2.

b) 10... f5 11. e4 d6 (after 11... xe4 12. dxe4 White has a stable plus due to his good light-squared bishop) 12. g5! Thanks to his well-placed knight on e4 and his more active minor pieces, White has seized the initiative. On 12... f6 he can withdraw his bishop to e3. Against 12... d7, a good move is 13. e1.

c) 10... f6 11. d4 (11. e1 transposes to variation A) 11... exd4 12. b3 d6 13. fxd4 As a consequence of Black’s ...f7-f6, White has a small but stable advantage.

11. e1

White has to play accurately, paying attention to the order of moves.

Instead 11. e4 gives Black the possibility of: 11... a7?! 12. d4 (after 12. e3?! x b5 13. a b5 d d5 the position is approximately equal) 12... x b5? Taking the bishop on b5 at once is probably best (12... exd4 13. x d6 xd6, as in Duda – So, Internet 2018, gives White the extra option of xd4 with the idea of xd b5). 13. a b5 (or 13. dxc5 x c3 14. bxc3 d e7∞) 13... exd4 14. x d6 xd6 15. xd4 xd4 16. x d4 d7= And Black has no noticeable problems.

11... a7 12. e4!

This is why we left our knight on d2! It doesn’t pay Black to take the bishop on c4, since with his knight on a7 his pawns would be left vulnerable.

12. f5

In the case of 12... xc4 13. xc4 f6± White has the advantage after either 14. d4?! or the simple 14. xa5.
13.\textit{b3}?! 

A very cunning idea in place of the simple 13.\textit{xe5}, although that move too leaves White with a small plus after 13...\textit{xe5} 14.\textit{xe5} \textit{xd3} 15.\textit{xd3} \textit{f1}. For example: 16...\textit{xf1}† 17.\textit{xf1} \textit{c6} 18.\textit{b5}+. The white bishop will soon come out to e3 or f4, giving Black trouble.

13...\textit{xd3}?! 

A better option is 13...\textit{c6} 14.\textit{e4} with only a slight advantage to White.

14.\textit{e4}! \textit{xe4} 15.\textit{xe4}→

Black might seem to have an extra pawn in a quiet position, but the rook is heading for g4 to start a dangerous attack! For example:

15...\textit{c6} 

Or 15...\textit{d7} which is no improvement; after 16.\textit{g5} \textit{h6} 17.\textit{h5} \textit{f6} 18.\textit{h4} the attack is dangerous.

16.\textit{g4} \textit{e7} 17.\textit{e2} 

And Black has no better move than 17...\textit{h8}, surrendering the e5-pawn; 17...\textit{d6} 18.\textit{e3} is worse, and 17...\textit{f6}?! 18.\textit{g5}! is also bad for Black.
The availability of this move justifies Black’s decision to play \( ...f7-f5 \) on move 13.

16.\( \textit{W}xb7 \)

A practically forced capture.

The game Vachier-Lagrave – Aronian, London 2016, saw instead: 16.\( \textit{g}g5?! \) c6 17.\( \textit{c}c4\textit{\_xc4 18.dxc4 e4} \). After 19.\( \textit{\_xe4 fxe4 20.\textit{Wxe4} \) Black could have continued strongly with 20...\( \textit{d7! 21.c5 \_xc5} 22.\_xe7 \_xf2\textit{\textperiodcentered} \). emerging with an extra pawn after 23.\( \textit{h2 \_xe1} 24.\_xe7 \_xc3!.

16...\( \textit{b8} \)

If 16...c6?! then: 17.\( \textit{c}c4\textit{\_xc4 18.\textit{Wb3\textperiodcentered} \) The queen has escaped, and White remains a pawn up.

17.\( \textit{f3} \) c6 18.\( \textit{\_xc6 e4 19.dxe4 \_xc6} \)

Although White has several pawns for the piece, the position remains wholly unclear. A good reply to 20.\( \textit{xf5} \) is 20...\( \textit{f6} \).

B22) 12.\( \textit{e4}! \)

Once again some accuracy on White’s part is required.

12...\( \textit{a7} \)

In this case Black cannot play: 12...f5? 13.\( \textit{b3\textperiodcentered} \) h8 14.\( \textit{xd6 cxd6} 15.\( \textit{g5=} \) If his bishop were on h5, he would have had the resource \( ...\_f7 \) in reply to the queen check.

13.h3 \( \textit{h5} 14.d4 \_xb5 \)

Nothing is altered by 14...\( \textit{exd4} 15.\_xd6 \textit{xd6} 16.\( \textit{xd4} \) (16...\( \textit{xb5} 17.axb5 \) transposes to variation B222).

15.axb5

Here we examine B221) 15...f6 and B222) 15...\( \textit{exd4} \).

B221) 15...f6 16.\( \textit{e3} \)

An inadequate try is: 16.\( \textit{dxe5 \_xe5} 17.\( \textit{xd8 exd8} 18.\_xe5 \textit{fxe5=} \) The presence of opposite bishops compensates for the weakness of the e5-pawn.

16...\( \textit{c4} 17.\( \textit{a4\textperiodcentered} \)

This position occurred twice within a short space of time in games between Ragger and V. Mikhalevski. In the first, Black obtained a good position; but in the second, Ragger improved his play and won.
17...\texttt{\textquotesingle}f7

Or 17...\texttt{\textquotesingle}xe3 18.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xe3±, and now Black does badly with 18...\texttt{\textquotesingle}xf3?! 19.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xf3 exd4 20.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xd4±; White has a large plus after 20...\texttt{\textquotesingle}e5 21.\texttt{\textquotesingle}e4† and \texttt{\textquotesingle}c5.

In the event of 17...\texttt{\textquotesingle}b6!? 18.\texttt{\textquotesingle}b3† \texttt{\textquotesingle}f7 19.\texttt{\textquotesingle}c2 White has a slight edge due to his good pawn on b5.

18.dxe5 \texttt{\textquotesingle}xe5 19.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xe5 \texttt{\textquotesingle}xe5 20.\texttt{\textquotesingle}ad1 \texttt{\textquotesingle}c8

21.\texttt{\textquotesingle}d4!±

In the first of the games I mentioned, the continuation was 21.b3 \texttt{\textquotesingle}d8 with a comfortable position for Black in Ragger – Mikhalevski, Chalkidiki 2018.

Two months later, Ragger improved his play against the same opponent.

21.\texttt{\textquotesingle}c4 22.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xf6 \texttt{\textquotesingle}f5

Otherwise Black stands very badly.

On 22.gxf6? 23.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xf6† \texttt{\textquotesingle}h8, there can follow:

a) 24.\texttt{\textquotesingle}d7? This being a rapid game, White goes somewhat astray. 24...\texttt{\textquotesingle}g8 25.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xc4 \texttt{\textquotesingle}xd7† was Ragger – Mikhalevski, St Petersburg (rapid) 2018.

b) 24.b3! \texttt{\textquotesingle}f5 25.\texttt{\textquotesingle}g4+ with a winning advantage. The knight can't move away in view of \texttt{\textquotesingle}d4†, while ...\texttt{\textquotesingle}h7-\texttt{\textquotesingle}h5 loses to \texttt{\textquotesingle}h6.

23.\texttt{\textquotesingle}d4±

White is a pawn to the good. Black can't play 23...\texttt{\textquotesingle}xb2 on account of 24.\texttt{\textquotesingle}c2 followed by \texttt{\textquotesingle}f6†.

B222) 15...exd4

16.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xd6

The game Vachier-Lagrave – So, Paris 2018, saw the unsuccessful 16.g4 \texttt{\textquotesingle}g6 17.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xd6 \texttt{\textquotesingle}xd6 18.\texttt{\textquotesingle}d4=. As a result of White's loss of tempo with g2-g4, Black has no problems.

16...\texttt{\textquotesingle}xd6

Or 16...\texttt{\textquotesingle}xf3 17.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xf3 \texttt{\textquotesingle}xd6 18.\texttt{\textquotesingle}d1! (better than 18.\texttt{\textquotesingle}f4 \texttt{\textquotesingle}d7), and now:

a) 18...\texttt{\textquotesingle}f8 19.\texttt{\textquotesingle}f4 \texttt{\textquotesingle}c5 20.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xb7 dx5 21.bxc3 occurred in Giri – Aronian, Leuven 2016. Black has to defend his pawn on c7. On 21...\texttt{\textquotesingle}ac8 White can simply capture with 22.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xa5. In the case of 21...\texttt{\textquotesingle}ec8 22.c4! \texttt{\textquotesingle}xc4 23.\texttt{\textquotesingle}xa5± White has a large plus in spite of the equal material. We answer 23...\texttt{\textquotesingle}ab8 with 24.\texttt{\textquotesingle}f3, and Black still has problems with the c7-pawn. For instance after 24...\texttt{\textquotesingle}b4 25.\texttt{\textquotesingle}a7! Black can't capture on b5 on account of the back-rank mate.
b) 18...\(\textsf{\texttt{e5}}\) 19.\(\textsf{\texttt{xd4}}\) \(\textsf{\texttt{xb5}}\) 20.\(\textsf{\texttt{xb7}}\) and again Black has problems due to his weak queenside pawns.

c) 18...c5 19.\(\textsf{\texttt{cxd4}}\) cxd4

20.\(\textsf{\texttt{e3}}\)! With these possibilities:

c1) 20...d3 21.\(\textsf{\texttt{a3}}\) \(\textsf{\texttt{c4}}\) 22.\(\textsf{\texttt{xd4}}\)± \(\textsf{\texttt{b4}}\) (or 22...\(\textsf{\texttt{e6}}\) 23.\(\textsf{\texttt{xb7}}\)± and Black can't take on b2 in view of 24.\(\textsf{\texttt{xa8}}\)) 23.\(\textsf{\texttt{d4}}\) \(\textsf{\texttt{xb5}}\) 24.\(\textsf{\texttt{c3}}\)!± With this quiet move, White unblocks the d-file and acquires a huge plus. Now 24...\(\textsf{\texttt{xb2}}\)? 25.\(\textsf{\texttt{g4}}\) is hopeless for Black. The only line to leave him with saving chances is 24...\(\textsf{\texttt{f6}}\)! 25.\(\textsf{\texttt{d7}}\) \(\textsf{\texttt{e5}}\).

c2) 20...\(\textsf{\texttt{d5}}\) 21.\(\textsf{\texttt{g3}}\)!, and now 21...\(\textsf{\texttt{xb5}}\) is unplayable owing to 22.\(\textsf{\texttt{h6}}\). White has a substantial plus, since with play on opposite wings the bishop is much better than the knight.

17.\(\textsf{\texttt{xd4}}\)

The unfortunate position of the black pawn on a5 gives White a small plus in spite of the doubled f-pawns. Let's see how the game might continue:

19...a4

Fixing the b2-pawn, not allowing b2-b3. At first sight Black is all right, but White has a good rook manoeuvre available.
On 19...\texttt{Fe8} White plays: 20.\texttt{f1} \texttt{e8} 21.\texttt{f1} \texttt{a8} 22.\texttt{f2}±. Once his king goes to d3, White can develop his bishop without worrying about ...\texttt{c4}.

\textbf{20.\texttt{e7} \texttt{f8} 21.\texttt{c7}!}

An important move, depriving the knight of the c4-square. Now after ...d6-d5 Black will constantly have to reckon with \texttt{f4}.

\textbf{21...d5}

A phase of forced play now begins. I have come to the conclusion that Black can hold the position with the aid of some precise moves. For example:

\begin{enumerate}
    \item \texttt{a) 24.d1 d8 25.b7 c4 26.c1 d6?} Not forced, but probably the best move in the position. 27.xd6 (27.b6 f7 isn't so clear) 27...\texttt{c7} h6! 29.xg7+ \texttt{h8}±. And Black holds on, thanks to his strong d-pawn. He will most likely succeed in exchanging his pawns on a4 and d4 for the two white b-pawns.
    \item \texttt{b) 24.e1 e8!} (not 24...\texttt{g5}? 25.e7! gxf4 26.g7+ \texttt{h8} 27.xh7+ \texttt{g8} 28.f4+ and there is no defence against h4-h5-h6, winning) 25.xe8+ (or 25.f1 xe1+ 26.xc1 a3! 27.bxa3 \texttt{xa3=} and the pawns on b5 and d4 are of about equal strength) 25...\texttt{xe8} 26.xb7 c4 27.d7 g5 28.xd4 a3 29.bxa3 \texttt{xa3=}.
\end{enumerate}

As a result of his small tactical ploy, Black manages to exchange the queenside pawns.

\textbf{22.f1}

It's best to bring the king to the centre, leaving the bishop on c1 just for now.

On 22.f4, Black has 22...d4 23.c4 f6! (not 23...\texttt{c8}?! 24.xb7 c4 25.c7±; White threatens \texttt{xa4}, and in addition his b-pawn has become too dangerous).

\textbf{22...f6}

Or:

\begin{enumerate}
    \item \texttt{a) 22.a5} 23.b4! \texttt{xb5} 24.f4± and Black has problems due to his misplaced rook on b5.
    \item \texttt{b) 22.d4!?} By freeing the d5-square, Black aims to eliminate the potential threats of \texttt{e3}
and \( \texttt{f4} \); all the same, with a pawn less, he is definitely worse. 23.cxd4 (with the white bishop on c1, the continuation 23.c4 \( \texttt{c8} \) 24.\texttt{xb7} \( \texttt{xc4} \) isn’t so good) 23...f6 24.\texttt{e2}

And now:

- a) 25.\texttt{c1} a3 26.\texttt{xa3} \texttt{xa3} 27.\texttt{xb7} \( \texttt{xc4} \) and White keeps the initiative – but if Black makes a few precise moves, a drawn position comes about. In the event of 28.b6 \( \texttt{c3} \) 29.\texttt{e1}, Black saves himself with 29...g5! 30.\texttt{g3} d3 31.\texttt{e1} d2. White then only has perpetual check.

- b) 25.e5 \( \texttt{xc7} \) 26.\texttt{xc7} \( \texttt{d5} \) 27.\texttt{d6} \( \texttt{f7} \) And thanks to the ...a4-a3 thrust, Black holds the position. For example 28.\texttt{d1} a3 29.\texttt{xa3} \( \texttt{c3} \) 30.\texttt{xd4} \( \texttt{xb5} \), and after 31.\texttt{b4} \( \texttt{xd6} \) a drawn rook endgame is reached.

23...\texttt{a5}

For 23...\texttt{d4} 24.cxd4, see the note to Black’s 22nd move, variation b.

The computer likes 23...\texttt{c4}; but from the human viewpoint, surrendering the d-pawn in this way is rather odd: 24.\texttt{d7} \( \texttt{a5} \) (24...\texttt{b6}?! 25.\texttt{d6}±) 25.\texttt{xd5} \( \texttt{c8} \) 26.\texttt{d3}± Now in answer to 26...\texttt{g6}, both 27.\texttt{d4} and 27.\texttt{d6} are good moves. And in the event of 26...\texttt{b6} 27.\texttt{f5} White is ready to play b2-b4, so Black will not succeed in winning the b5-pawn.

24.b4 \( \texttt{xb5} \) 25.\texttt{e3}±
As his rook on b5 is boxed in, Black will have to give up a pawn on a4 or d5, after which White will have the advantage. A good reply to 25...e8 is 26.f1!

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we considered 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Nc4 c5 4.c3 Ng6 5.d3 0–0 6.0–0 d5 7.exd5 cxd5 8.a4 a5. The interpolation of a2-a4 and ...a7-a5 is plainly in White’s favour, as Black thereby weakens the b5-square. But White needs to choose his move-order accurately, so that Black can’t capture the bishop on b5 with ...a7, or play ...f7-f5! – as he can after 9.Nbd2! Nb6 10.b5 a6 11.Nc1 g4 if White plays 12.h3 instead of 12.Ne4!. After the correct move, the outcome should be an ending where White has a small but stable plus. Essentially there will only be two results to play for.
Abridged Variation Index

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

Part I: The ...d5 Break

Chapter 1

1.e4 e5 2.\(d\)f3 \(c\)c6 3.\(c\)c4 \(c\)c5 4.c3 \(f\)f6 5.d3 0–0 6.0–0 d5 7.exd5 \(\text{\(\text{\(d\)}\)}\)xd5 8.a4

A) 8...\(\text{\(f\)}\)f5 19
B) 8...\(\text{\(b\)}\)b6 25

Chapter 2

1.e4 e5 2.\(d\)f3 \(c\)c6 3.\(c\)c4 \(c\)c5 4.c3 \(f\)f6 5.d3 0–0 6.0–0 d5 7.exd5 \(\text{\(\text{\(d\)}\)}\)xd5 8.a4 a6

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A) 10...h6!? 131
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1.e4 e5 2.dıf3 dıc6 3.ıc4 ićc5 4.c3 ıf6 5.d3 d6 6.0–0 a6 7.a4 ıa7 8.ıe1 0–0 9.h3

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1.e4 e5 2.dıf3 dıc6 3.ıc4 ićc5 4.c3 ıf6 5.d3 d6 6.0–0 a6 7.a4 ıa7 8.ıe1 0–0 9.h3 a5!? 10.ıbd2 ıe6 11.b3

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Part III: Lines with ...a5

Chapter 11

1.e4 e5 2.dıf3 dıc6 3.ıc4 ićc5 4.c3 ıf6 5.d3 0–0 6.0–0 d6 7.ıe1

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B) 7...a5!? 192

Part IV: Early Deviations

Chapter 12

1.e4 e5 2.dıf3 dıc6 3.ıc4

A) 3...g6 214
B) 3...ıe7 215
C) 3...ıf6 4.d3 ıe7 216

Chapter 13

1.e4 e5 2.dıf3 dıc6 3.ıc4 ıf6 4.d3 h6 5.0–0 d6 6.c3

A) 6...g6 240
B) 6...gı5 245