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Shirov on Fire

by Glenn Budzinski

Fire On Board by Alexei Shirov, 1997 Cadogan Books, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 232pp. \$19.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$16.95)

When you purchase a book containing a player's best games, what do you expect to find? How important are game annotations and analysis, or are similarities in playing style (or lack thereof) between the reader and the author all that matter? Why do you buy a book by player "A" rather than player "B"? Is name recognition of the author important??

For whatever it's worth, when this writer buys a book of a player's games, it is usually because of an attraction to the author's playing style. Thus, with a preference for open positions, this writer's library is more to contain books of games of Morphy, Pillsbury or Kasparov rather than Karpov or Steinitz. Of course, evaluating Alexei Shirov's new book *Fire On Board* would be easy were it based upon whether one either was attracted to or repulsed by Shirov's love of hair-raising tactics and often wildly unbalanced positions. Thus, given that bias, let's take a look at it in as objective a manner as possible, turning our attention on aspects other than playing style and name recognition.

Fire On Board consists of five chapters, plus a Foreword by Jonathan Speelman and an Introduction written by Shirov. In the Introduction, he notes: "In my selection of games for this book I have chosen first of all the most memorable, and only then the best games. I think that the games that hold the most pleasant memories are the ones that best demonstrate my approach to chess." There are eighty-two complete, annotated games in chronological order contained in three chapters: Growing Up (1979-1987; and Winning the World Cadet (1988) each include a few games, with the vast majority found under Chapter Three, Professional Chess Life (1989-1996). As expected, most are Shirov victories, although several draws and a few losses have been included. In Chapter Four, he focuses strictly on the Botvinnik Variation of the Slav (1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Nf3 e6 5 Bg5 dxc4 6 e4 b5 7 e5 h6 8 Bh4 g5 9 Nxc5 hxg5 10 Bxc5 Nbd7), an opening favorite of his as illustrated through fifteen games from throughout his playing career. Thirteen endgames

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are examined in Chapter Five. In addition, the book also contains indices of opponents, openings, endings and variations in the Botvinnik System, but no listing of Shirov's tournament results to date.

Arguably, the best way to assess such a book is to examine the annotations. As nearly as can be determined, are they accurate? Are they sufficiently complete to enable the average player to understand the game? Are they written in such a style as to hold the reader's interest, or are they little more than lines of analyses, devoid of text? Finally - and this is probably only a peculiar whim of this writer - did the author care enough to use unique analysis, or did he recycle previously published material?

Unfortunately, for the most part, the latter is true in *Fire On Board*. To Shirov's credit, however (unlike most other authors), he freely admits in the Introduction that "First I collected some of my relatively old annotations from various magazines and tried to make complimentary comments and corrections to them " (page ten). Despite his assertion, most of the games reviewed were based upon nearly identical, previously published commentary from various issues of *New In Chess* or other magazines. A cursory comparison with the *New In Chess* articles revealed that, in most instances, there was little, if any, additional analysis.

On the other hand, the quality of the annotations appears to be very good, since even the most complicated games consist of reasonably explicit notes that should enable players of average ability to appreciate the play. On the other hand, the quality of the annotations appears to be very good, since even the most complicated games consist of reasonably explicit notes that should enable players of average ability to appreciate the play.

However, the reader should also understand that given the complexities of high-level play, coupled with Shirov's penchant for wild tactics, there are positions, perhaps even entire games, that may prove difficult to understand, regardless of the quality of the notes.

Typical of much grandmaster commentary, occasionally Shirov forgets that he's writing primarily for the non-grandmaster community. For example, in Game Fifty-six, **Shirov-Benjamin** from 1994 Horgen, after **1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 e6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nc6 5 Nc3 a6 6 Be2 Qc7 7 Be3 Nf6 8 0-0 Be7 9 f4 d6 10 Qe1 0-0 11 Qg3 Nxd4 12 Bxd4 b5 13 a3 Bb7 14 Kh1 Bc6 15 Rae1 Qb7 16 Bd3 b4 17 Nd1 g6 18 Nf2 bxa3 19 bxa3 Nh5 20 Qe3 Nxf4 21 Qxf4 e5 22 Ng4 f6 23 Bc4+ Kh8**



[FEN "r4r1k/1q2b2p/p1bp1pp1/4p3/2BBPQN1/P7/2P3PP/4RR1K w - - 0 24"]

Shirov states that "Of course 23 Kg7 24 Qh6+ [isn't] worth thinking about" (page 124). But, why not? Shirov does not make it clear for the average reader. (The game finished **24 Nxe5 dxe5 25 Qxe5 Kg7 26 Qf4 Rad8 27 c3 h6 28 Rb1 Qa8 29 Rb6 Rxd4 30 cxd4 Bxe4 31 Re1 f5 32 Qe5+ Bf6 33 Rxf6 1-0**). It still would have been nice to know what Shirov planned after 23 Kg7.

Similarly, in Game Fifty-five, **Nikolic-Shirov**, also from 1994 Horgen, the following position in the Meran Defense is reached after **1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 e3 e6 5 Nf3 Nbd7 6 Bd3 dxc4 7 Bxc4 b5 8 Bd3 Bb7 9 0-0 a6 10 e4 c5 11 d5**.



[FEN "r2qkb1r/1b1n1ppp/p3pn2/1ppP4/4P3/2NB1N2/PP3PPP/R1BQ1RK1 b kq - 0 11"]

At this point, Shirov comments "Here this is forced." Wondering what was wrong with the obvious 11 e5, this writer went scrambling through [Encyclopedia of Chess Openings, Volume D \(ECO\)](#) and his million game database to find the position. Although *ECO* also recommends 11 d5, a note offers an analogous position by transposition: 8 Bd3 a6 9 e4 Bb7 10 e5 Nd5 12 0-0 and, according to *ECO*, White had the advantage after 12 Be7 13 Bd2 0-0 14 Rc1 Qb6 15 Qc2 h6 16 Qc7, Ivkov-Pomar, 1968 Malaga. Another interesting line that could have benefited from Shirov's insights is 11 e5 cxd4 12 Nxb5 Bxf3 13 Qxf3 when, if 13 Nxe5?, White has 14 Nc7+! In fact, dozens of examples of 11 e5 turned up in the database, including Kopecky-Sykora from 1989, which continued 11 e5 Nd5 12 Ng5 Nxc3 13 bxc3 Be7 14 Qg4 h6 15 Nxe6 fxe6 16 Qxg7 Nf8 17 Be3 Ng6 18 Bxg6+ and White went on to score a quick knockout after 18 Kd7 19 Bf7 c4 20 d5 Bxd5 21 Rad1 Rg8 22 Rxd5+ exd5 23 Qxh6 1-0. Finally, there was also the intriguing game Siekanski-Matlak, 1989 Polanica Zdroj, which saw 11 e5, draw!

Another game that could have used some embellishment, at least early on, is Game Sixty, **Shirov-Timman**, an Evans Gambit from 1995 Biel, annotated by Shirov initially for *New In Chess 1995/6* (although Shirov cites the August 1996 issue.) After **1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 b4 Bxb4 5 c3 Be7 6 d4 Na5 7 Be2 exd4 8 Qxd4**, the move **8...d6** made its inaugural appearance. Apparently unaware of Michael Rohde's analysis in his 1997 pamphlet [The Great Evans Gambit Debate](#), Shirov mentions that "someone" recommended 8...d6.



[FEN "r1bqk1nr/ppp1bppp/3p4/n7/3QP3/2P2N2/P3BPPP/RNB1K2R w KQkq - 0 9"]

In any event, the game continued **9 Qxg7 Bf6 10 Qg3 Qe7 11 0-0**, when Shirov discusses what happens if Black had played 11 Qxe4. (He corrected his previous *New In Chess* analysis by including Cifuentes' comment that 12 Re1 is insufficient for White due to 12 Kf8 13 Bb5 Qg6.) He concludes by noting that "11 0-0 is a complete bluff and the right continuation would have been 11 Qf4 with an unclear game." This appears to be a critical position, worthy of additional commentary. While 11 0-0 may be the right move, both Rohde and Tim Harding (the latter in his 1997 monograph *Play the Evans Gambit*) consider 11 Qf4 to lead to no worse than even chances for Black after 11 Nc6 12 0-0 Bd7 13 Re1 h5 14 h4 Nh6. Rohde, in fact, awards 11 0-0 an "!", adding that he feels that "Shirov's 11 0-0, aside from being psychologically strongest, as a new and dangerous sacrifice is offered, is objectively best."

Lest this writer be accused of being too critical, let it also be said that *Fire On Board* contains much complete and well-done analytical work by Shirov. The remainder of the Shirov-Timman game, for instance, aside from being a terrific game to enjoy for purely aesthetic reasons, also includes some good analysis. Although there is too much commentary to repeat in its entirety here, some of the highlights follow:



[FEN "r1b1k1nr/ppp1qp1p/3p1b2/n7/4P3/2P2NQ1/P3BPPP/RNB2RK1 b kq - 0 11"]

11...Bd7 12 Nd4 0-0-0 13 Nd2 Nc6 14 Qe3 h5 15 Rb1 Nh6 16 Qd3 b6

I had expected 16 Rdg8, after which 17 Rxb7 Nxd4 18 Qa6 Nxe2+ 19 Kh1 fails to 19 Qe6, when the black king can escape to e7. The correct response is 17 N2f3 with a slight advantage.

17 a4! Kb8?!

Playing with fire. After 17 Rdg8 18 a5 Nxa5 19 Qa6+ Kd8 20 Qxa7 Ke8! Black can transfer his king to safety, for example 21 Nb5 Bxb5 22 Qb8+ Qd8 23 Bxb5+ Ke7 24 Qxd8+ Rxd8 25 Bb2, and White has only a small advantage.

18 a5! Nxa5 19 Qa6 Ka8?

This seems to have been the decisive mistake. It was obligatory to play 19 Bxd4 20 cxd4 Ka8, although after 21 Bb2!, with the idea of 21 Bc8 22 Qb5!, White keeps a strong initiative for the pawn.

20 e5! Qxe5

20 dxe5 loses to 21 Bf3+ Kb8 22 Qxa5 exd4 23 Qxa7+ Kxa7 24 Ra1+.

21 Bf3+ d5 22 Nc4! Bc8 23 Qxa5! Qxd4!

You don't see this kind of mutual queen sacrifice very often, do you? Of course 23 bxa5? loses immediately to 24 Nxe5 Bxe5 25 Nc6.

24 Qa2 Qxc3 25 Be3!

It was not too late to fall into a clever trap: 25 Bb2 Qxf3!! 26 gxf3 Rhg8+ 27 Kh1 dxc4 28 Bxf6? Bb7 and Black wins! Although White has now sacrificed three pawns, he has tremendous threats. Black's monarch is worth more than his queen.

25 Bb7 26 Bxb6! cxb6 27 Nxb6+ Kb8 28 Nxd5 1-0

Now 28 Qxf3 29 gxf3 Rhg8+ 30 Kh1 Bd4 31 Qc4 is hopeless for Black, so he resigned. This game was awarded the first brilliancy prize at the 1995 Biel Festival.

The big attraction to *Fire On Board*, however, still must be considered to be the games themselves. As objective as one tries to be, it is impossible to ignore Shirov's gift of creativity over the board. Typical of his unmistakable tactical style are the following two, lesser known games. In the first, included

as Game One in the book, an eleven-year old Shirov dismantles an experienced IM rated over 2400, while the latter game features a speculative queen sacrifice by Shirov that resulted in a two knights and pawns versus queen ending which, apparently, was not deemed worthy enough by him for incorporation into the book. Speelman provided the game score in the Foreword:

Shirov - Zhuravlev

1983 Riga

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 de4 4.Ne4 Nd7 5.Nf3 Ngf6 6.Bd3 Ne4 7.Be4 Nf6 8. Bd3 c5 9.O-O cd4 10.Nd4 Be7 11.Bf4 O-O 12.Re1 Qb6 13.Be5 Bd7 14.Re3 Rfd8 15.Rh3 g6 16.Qf3 Be8 17.Nb3 Nd7 18.Bd4 Qc7 19.Rh7 e5 20.Bg6 Nf6 21.Re1 Rd4 22.Nd4 Nh7 23.Bh7 Kh7 24.Qh5 Kg8 25.Nf5 1-0

B. Lalic - Shirov

1994 Moscow

1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Bb4 3.Nd5 Be7 4.d4 d6 5.e4 Nf6 6.Nxe7 Qxe7 7.f3 exd4 8. Qxd4 Nc6 9.Qc3 0-0 10.Ne2 Nh5 11.g4 Qh4+ 12.Kd1 Nf6 13.Ng3 Be6 14. Be3 Nd7 15.Be2 a5 16.Kd2 Nc5 17.b3 Rfe8 18.Rag1 f6 19.Kc1 Ra6 20.Kd1 Rb6 21.g5 a4 22.gxf6 g6 23.Bg5 Qxg5 24.Nf5 Qxf5 25.exf5 Bxf5 26.Rg5 Kf7 27.Rxf5 axb3 28.Rh5 gxh5 29.axb3 Rxb3 30.Qc2 Kxf6 31.Qxh7 Ra3 32.Qh6+ Ke7 33.Qg7+ Kd8 34.Rg1 Na4 35.Qf6+ Kc8 36.Rg8 Rxg8 37.Qe6 + Kb8 38.Qxg8+ Ka7 39.Qg7 Kb6 40.h4 Nc5 41.f4 Rh3 42.Bxh5 Rxh4 43. Bg4 Na5 44.Qc3 Nab3 45.Qf3 Nd4 46.Qg2 Rh8 47.f5 Rf8 48.Qf2 Nc6 49.f6 Ne5 50.Bh5 Nxc4 51.f7 c6 52.Qf4 Ne5 53.Qh6 Rxf7 54.Bxf7 Nxf7 55.Qf6 Ne5 56.Qxd6 Ncd3 57.Qe7 c5 58.Kd2 Nc6 59.Qg7 Nde5 60.Kc3 Ka6 61. Qf8 b6 62.Qa8+ Kb5 63.Qe8 c4 64.Qg8 1/2-1/2

Despite a few flaws, such as the lack of a significant amount of new material, the omission of *ECO* opening codes for each game, and the occasional need for more detailed commentary, *Fire On Board* is a hard book not to like. Shirov's games are as much a study in creativity as they are a study in tactics. Anyone who believes that there is no longer any beauty in chess, obviously is unfamiliar with the play of Alexei Shirov. Regardless of whether one wishes to improve one's tactical ability or just enjoys playing through interesting games, this is a book not to be missed. And, who knows? Maybe we'll see another Latvian World Champion within the next few months.

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by Alexei Shirov

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