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Big and Beautiful

Stephen Ham

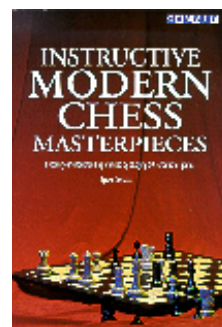
Instructive Modern Chess Masterpieces, by GM Igor Stohl, 2001 Gambit Publications, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 318 pp., \$24.95.

Chess game collections have probably been in the marketplace since the first day that chess books were sold. Some of these books display the games of a specific player(s), others show games from tournaments or matches, while yet others represent a niche such as brilliancies. Recently, another game collection book entered the market, a book that stands out from the others in several respects. This book is a collection of 50 grandmaster versus grandmaster games, spanning chronologically from Gelfand-Dreev, Tilburg 1993 (Game 1) to Anand-Khalifman, FIDE World Cup, Shenyang 2000 (Game 50). What makes this book different from the rest? That's a long story, so I'll begin with my first impression.

The first thing I noticed about my soft cover review copy was its large size. Like some Gambit Publications books (*Nunn's Chess Openings* and *The Road to Chess Improvement* to just name two), it is 25 centimeters tall and 17 centimeters wide (this soft cover version also weighs in at a hefty 709 grams or 1 pound, 9 ounces). Also in common with those books, it is jam packed with high quality chess information. Coupled with its large size, Gambit's typesetter, John Nunn, chose small fonts, a trait noted in other Gambit books. For illustration, I was able to achieve a similarly sized font by converting my Microsoft Word text to a size "10." This ensures that a great deal of information is presented per page (even the margins seem narrow, creating maximum space for content), although the drawback is that some readers may find the font size too small. Normally one senses with chess books that the author and publisher reached a compromise on space; the publisher tries to keep the number of printed pages to a minimum without sacrificing the quality of content, in order to control costs. But here, my sense is that Gambit Publications saw that both the quality and quantity of Stohl's work is great. Therefore I speculate that they accepted that this book would be large, and so reduced the font size in order to avoid adding pages to an already large book.

The book begins with a table of contents, an explanation of the symbols used, and a two-page Introduction. Next are the 50 heavily annotated games, followed by an Index of Players, and finally an Index of Openings (listed by opening name with an ECO code) while the games are referenced by page number as opposed to game number.

Often game collection books are authored by the chess player himself when it's his or her games being presented. Obvious examples are: *My 60 Memorable Games*, by Robert Fischer or *Anatoly Karpov's Best Games*, by Anatoly Karpov. At other times, the game collections cover a specific tournament or more commonly a grouping of games based upon a specific focus, such as miniatures or quality (the proverbial brilliancies). An example of the latter is: *The 100 Best Chess Games of the 20th Century*, by Andy Soltis. But if analytical quality is the book's focus, then the presumption is that when games are annotated in great detail, it helps to have first-hand knowledge of these games. Instead, this book is authored by a man who has not included a single one of his own games in the book. Igor Stohl is a grandmaster from Slovakia. He was a runner-up in the 1982 World Junior





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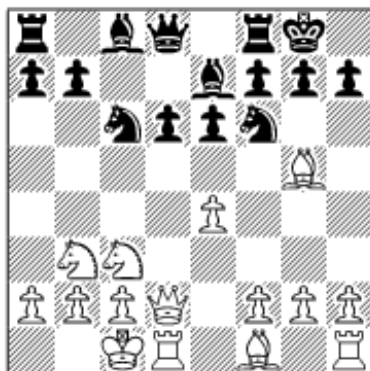
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Championship and now plays in several national chess leagues. He is an experienced chess writer, having articles published in *Ceskoslovensky Sach*, *Chess Informant*, *New In Chess Yearbooks*, and *ChessBase Magazine*. Stohl is also an opening theoretician, so I expected great detail in that part of each game's presentation. My expectations were met by some excellent opening theory and commentary. Much of this theoretical analysis and commentary can apparently only be found here, thanks to Stohl's highly original work (an example of original analysis is provided below). However, to my surprise, the book's detail actually increases during coverage of the transition from the opening to the middlegame and each game remains deeply annotated through to its conclusion.

Given the enormous detail presented in each of the fifty games, I initially questioned how an active chess player could find the time to accomplish such a daunting task. Stohl answered this question in his Introduction. Since January 1994, he authored the 'Game of the Month' for *Ceskoslovensky Sach*. These articles formed the backbone of this work. Thus Stohl's primary task was to select games from this large inventory and to expand them. Unfortunately I don't have any copies of *Ceskoslovensky Sach* from which to measure how much later material was added and what notes have been changed. However it is clear that opening theory commentary has been updated in light of subsequent events.

Examples of the updated game commentary are most easily found in the oldest games in the book. For example, Game 2 is Joel Benjamin-Vishy Anand, PCA Qualifier, Groningen 1993. The initial moves, with earlier annotations omitted, are: **1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 Nc6 6 Bg5 e6 7 Qd2 Be7 8 0-0 0-0 9 Nb3**



at which point Stohl's fourth note to this game reads, "Out of all the tested possibilities, this move, first played by Alekhine in 1936, has been one of the two to withstand the test of time. White avoids exchanges, which in principle favour the defence, and targets the d6-pawn as well. On the other hand, voluntary decentralization is not White's usual course of action in a sharp Sicilian. 9 Kb1 allows an immediate and effective 9...d5!, while the slower 9 f3 has another disadvantage – to implement the g4-g5 advance, White must lose time with his dark-squared bishop. The most direct move is 9 f4 Nxd4 10 Qxd4 Qa5. Even nowadays Black has little reason to fear 11 Bc4 Bd7 12 e5 dxe5 13 fxe5 Bc6 14 Bd2 Nd7 15 Nd5 Qd8 17 Nxe7+ Qxe7 17 Rhe1 Rfd8 18 Qg4 Nf8. The more recent try 11 Kb1!? is less explored, but dangerous. White's plan is to prepare the central advance thoroughly by first protecting his g5-bishop and developing the f1-bishop to a more suitable square. Good knowledge of the possible pitfalls is required; probably the strongest is 11...h6 12 h4 Rd8 13 Be2 (13 Bd3 Qc5!? is playable for Black) 13...Bd7 14 Qe3 Bc6 15 Rd3 Kf8!? 16 Bxf6 Bxf6 17 Bf3, Hracek-Kharlov, New York Open 1998. Now Black can play either 17...h5!? or even 17...Bxc3 18 Rxc3 d5!?, with a satisfactory position in both cases." Other examples of updated opening theory are evident further in this game and in other games. Another nice feature is that these games are all cross-referenced to the extent that if this position occurs elsewhere in this book, the commentary makes mention of that.

How that task was accomplished is explained in the Introduction where we read, "And this proved to be no mean feat. 'Analysing and annotating games is a continuous process. You're rarely finished with a game. In the course of time new ideas may crop up or analogous situations may further deepen your thoughts'; these words written by highly esteemed writer and analyst Jan Timman in *New in Chess* came to my mind more than once during the year 2000. The original magazine notes, which had their inevitable limitations in terms of space and time, became only

a starting point for further work, the final aim being to get much closer to the elusive 'ultimate' truth. *ChessBase* and *Fritz* provided the nowadays indispensable electronic assistance. A combination of a suitable chess database and a playing program is, together with a chessboard, also the most suitable way to study this book."

So how were the 50 games chosen for this book? One clue is the first word in this book's title...Instructive. So it's not enough for a game to be a modern chess masterpiece, it must also be instructive. Stohl mentions the subjective nature of game selection in his Introduction and continues, "But although the readers might consider that some particularly brilliant efforts from the period 1994-2000 are missing, in my opinion the games chosen provide good instructional value and illustrate well all the important aspects of contemporary chess." For the record, I must mention that the book's first two games actually occurred in 1993. Stohl continues, "Understandably enough, I used not only my former annotations, but also other sources to which I had access, especially the notes by the players themselves. These gave me valuable information and in the text I have given credit as generously as possible." While Stohl mentions using other sources, no bibliography is offered. Instead, he states that he gives credit in his text. However such examples are not evident to me. While I confess to being unable to play through all 50 games and read each note within this huge book to date, I don't recall seeing other sources mentioned other than references to specific games. Instead, I did see numerous comments such as that found in Game 1, commentary to Black's 12th, "and now according to Gelfand....", but no book or periodical is mentioned which originally was the source of Gelfand's analysis.

So, outside sources were used, but one source that seems surprisingly little used is the ubiquitous *Chess Informant*. For example, Game 1, Boris Gelfand- Alexei Dreev, Tilburg 1993 is also Informant 59/484. Some notes appear in the *Chess Informant* that aren't mentioned in Stohl's book. But to Stohl's credit, the omitted analysis is often of minor consequence whereas Stohl's analysis is both broader and deeper and probably more objective than the *Chess Informant*. A very brief example of which is seen in this game, with earlier annotations omitted: **1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Nf3 e6 5 e3 Nbd7 6 Bd3 dxc4 7 Bxc4 b5 8 Bd3 Bb7 9 0-0 10 e4 c5 11 d5 c4 12 Bc2 Qc7 13 Nd4 e5?! 14 Nf5 g6 15 Nh6 Nh5!?**



At this stage, Gelfand continued with **16 Qf3?! Dreev**, analyzing in *Chess Informant* makes this his mainline (the diacritical marks are Stohl's) after briefly mentioning 16 g3 Bc5 17 Qf3 f6 as an unclear option. Dreev also assesses Gelfand's line as unclear. Stohl however first gave detailed analysis of 16 Be3 lines. Then he wrote, "White's idea is to weaken Black's kingside in exchange for his outpost on h6, but more to the point was the prophylactic 16 g3!? The intention is to finish development first (Be3, Qe2) and perhaps later consider pawn-breaks on the queenside or kingside (Ng4 and f4). It's far more

difficult to see what Black should do, as after 16...Bc5 White can play 17 Kh1 with a quick f4. I believe White retains a comfortable advantage, which is also borne out by the fact that 13...e5?! hasn't been repeated in serious practice since this game, despite its result." I think Stohl's assessment and reasoning is compelling. This stands in contrast to the *Chess Informant* where it's unlikely that Dreev would expose this weakness in his Semi-Slav Defense to the world. So the theoretical assessment of the 13...e5 line has been overturned by Stohl's analysis. Such original work is common throughout the book.

Given the emphasis upon chess instruction, Stohl continues, "The excellent book *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy* by John Watson deals with various strategic themes and motifs, illustrating them with carefully chosen and instructive examples.

The architecture of my book is very different; it necessarily can't be so systematic because it concentrates on the practical and analytical side of the game." In spite of the title and Stohl's claims to the contrary, I don't sense that this book is presented so as to be any more instructive than any other deeply annotated games are. Yes, it's true that one can't help but learn something from deep annotations if one puts forth the time and effort. But if chess instruction is truly Stohl's focus, then this could have been better accomplished with a series of questions and answers at important stages. Sadler is highly successful with this approach in his books: *The Slav*, *The Semi-Slav*, and *Queen's Gambit Declined*. But the best example of an instructional game collection book also comes from Gambit Publications, Ltd., John Nunn's *Understanding Chess Move by Move*. Instead, *Instructive Modern Chess Masterpieces* reminds me a great deal of Timman's book, *The Art of Chess Analysis*. In both books, the emphasis is really upon very deep annotations of some very fine and recent grandmaster games. In fact, the high level of annotations in this book are perhaps matched only by those in Timman's book and those in John Nunn's annotations to his own games. Chess instruction thus only seems a secondary by-product.

These fifty games are notable in that grandmasters are on both sides of the board in all games, and the games are generally "current" with respect to opening theory. Better yet, some of these grandmasters are of the "Super Grandmaster" class. Kasparov is seen most frequently with nine games, including his famous game versus "The World." I think that the inclusion of Kasparov-The World, Internet 1999, illustrates Stohl's tremendous work ethic because that game is 62 moves long and highly complex. Its inclusion also displays courage, since the game has already been deeply annotated by both Irina Krush and Garry Kasparov, and to a lesser extent others such as Alexander Baburin in *Chess Mail*. Therefore finding something original in that game that hasn't been already covered by others is a challenge that Stohl accepts. FIDE World Champion Anand is represented by five games, although the book always refers to him as by his nickname Vishy, rather than Viswanathan. Brain Games World Champion Kramnik also appears in five games.

None of the fifty games are provided with introductions. Instead, each game is followed by a "Summary" consisting of several paragraphs. This is often quite detailed. This summation generally lists the turning points in each game along with mention of any motif that the game illustrated. While I find this recapitulation helpful, my preference is to read commentary about the game's turning points and see greater emphasis placed upon key concepts in the actual body of the game.

While this book is extraordinarily good at providing deep analysis, I am critical of the fact that Stohl frequently fails to assess the resulting positions clearly. He instead frequently opts for the use of vague expressions. For example, in Game 42, in a note to Black's 23rd move, he offers a sub-line and then writes that it, "...gets Black nowhere." What exactly does that mean, Igor? Does it mean that Black can't look for any advantage here? Or does it mean, as I think it should, that White has a clear advantage?

In spite of the above criticism, Gambit Publication's production values remain as consistently high here as in all of the books that I've seen from them, and I've seen many. While the print size may be too small for some, a great quantity of quality is thus economically packed into each page. The diagrams are clear and placed appropriately. My soft cover copy has a strong spine that enables the book to lay flat without damaging it. The only other minor production gripe that I have is some awkward usage of the English language, although this is a minor distraction.

This book will appeal to anyone searching for "truth" in chess. Stohl's deep concrete analysis and probing commentary gets about as close to this elusive truth as any book I've ever seen. While the amount of analysis is exceptional, I found the commentary to be proportionate to the analysis. In fact, the analysis supported the commentary, making the book relatively easy to follow and comprehend. While

players rated 1600 and below may find the book to be a data overload, it is still inspirational to any chess player to learn that chess games can be analyzed as deeply as this. Possibly the book's title is a misnomer or at least it was a poor choice of words to put "Instructive" into that title. Although chess instruction must surely be a by-product of studying this material, the book isn't presented in a pedagogic format. Therefore a reader using this book for instruction will have to invest a great deal of time and effort. Still, I suspect that lower rated players may find this book simply too deep and specific to be generally instructive.

But, instruction issues aside, this is a book I've already praised highly to my friends and wish to advocate to you as well. *Instructive Modern Chess Masterpieces* is on the top of my list for quality and quality of annotations. At \$24.95 for the soft cover edition, that's fifty cents per game, so I believe it represents an excellent value and is a book that most active chess players will want to have in their libraries.

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