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Of Life and Games

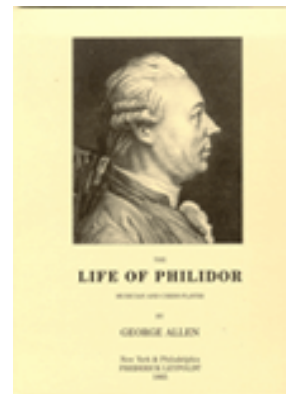
by John S. Hilbert

“The fpecial and indifpenfable original fources of information for the life of Philidor are the following ...” —*The Life of Philidor*, Preface, p.1

The Life of Philidor, Musician and Chess-Player, by George Allen, originally published 1863 (facsimile reprint Publishing House Moravian Chess 2001) 156pp., \$29.00

A Selection of Games at Chess: Actually Played by Philidor and his Contemporaries, by George Walker, originally published 1835 (facsimile reprint Publishing House Moravian Chess 2001) 112pp., \$19.00

The quotation above, taken from the Preface of *The Life of Philidor*, illustrates an initial hurdle for modern readers encountering this reprint of George Allen’s classic work on the French musician and chess-player. If ever a chess book deserved a modern edition rather than a facsimile, to make the work at least more visually accessible to the general chess reader, it is this one. Controversies over English Descriptive Notation versus Standard, or Algebraic, pale in comparison to the swamp of “f”s standing in place of “s”s the modern reader most struggle through in follow-ing the substance of this book, which, of course, one assumes is the purpose the reader has in reading it in the first place. And then of course there are the showstoppers that require a split second longer to translate, such as “foul” for “soul,” or “fingers” for “singers,” and of course “chefs,” for the game we love. How-ever, for the reader “poffeffed” of sufficient grit to perse-vere through a few pages of such visual in-timidation, “fuccesfs” is nearly guaranteed, and even the most implausible configurations will begin to make sense.





What the diligent reader will find, once he accustoms himself to the text, is a singularly detailed life of Francois-André Danican-Philidor (1726-1795), better known to modern chessplayers simply as Philidor. Born September 7, 1726, the first son of a third wife, a woman referred to by Allen as “of a character singularly unsophisticated and simple,” Philidor found himself early in life surrounded, if only inadvertently, by royalty. To be precise, his father was the son of Louis XV’s bassoon player, who had been allowed to retire by that monarch on a royal pension two years before Philidor’s birth.

After his father died, the young Philidor, actually too young for the post, was taken early as a page of the royal Chapel at Versailles. Not too long thereafter, Philidor was recognized as a musical prodigy. A religious piece written by the eleven-year-old Philidor was performed in the royal Chapel “before the King himself.” Three years later, a fourteen-year-old Philidor left the royal Chapel and began to support himself in Paris by copying music and giving lessons.

Philidor had learned chess while living among the Court’s musicians. Eighty strong, the musicians would wait each morning for the King, who heard Mass with music every morning. The waits sometimes would stretch for hours, and while cards were forbidden to pass the time, a long table with six inlaid chessboards was provided as a more suitable diversion. By the time Philidor left the royal Chapel, he left with the reputation as the best chessplayer among the musicians.

Given his growing love of the game, Philidor early on in his Paris stay visited the Café de la Régence, where he quickly learned that being the best chessplayer among the royal musicians hardly guaranteed him success against the best players Paris had to offer. Legal, for instance, initially gave him rook odds, and it took Philidor three years to work up to level games with the older man. Thus once more is the old adage found true that great ability at the chessboard is the consequence of earnest endeavor, and not merely raw talent. While in Paris Philidor also learned to play two games simultaneously, blindfolded, an accomplishment so startling for the times as to warrant its being noted in Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*.

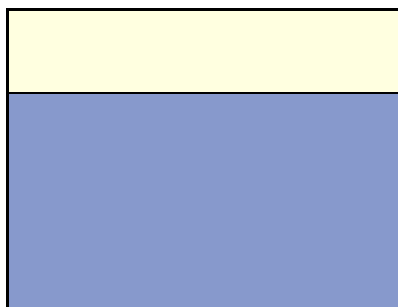
In 1745, when Philidor was yet in his teens, he appears to have helped professionally with the musical composition work of another extraordinary man, the philosopher, author, and musician

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Near the end of that year, we learn Philidor went on a short musical tour, which finally was transformed into a long residence abroad. The short musical tour involved an Italian whose thirteen-year-old daughter was a harpsichord sensation of the time. Sadly, once Philidor traveled to Rotterdam to join the tour, he learned of the girl's death, and thus, like many other future notables of all ages, "found himself penniless and a stranger in a foreign city."

In order to remedy his poverty, the young Philidor visited Rotterdam's coffee houses, where there his beloved chess was known as "Polish Draughts." On the strength of his winnings, he traveled to Amsterdam, and at the Hague, which was to be his home while living in Holland, played chess with, among many others, British officers, who suggested, in may be presumed, that Philidor would find the shores of England a welcome place for his talents. The future would prove such suggestions correct.

Philidor's great personal gifts included one perhaps somewhat unusual for a prodigy. That was his amiable nature. In England, where he first visited in 1747, he quickly made his name, playing a ten game match with Philip Stamma, wherein, at least to the modern ear, the unusual odds of the move plus scoring a draw as a win for his opponent, combined with his betting five to four on each game, were given. Philidor crushed Stamma by the score of 8-1, with 1 draw (or, given the match conditions, by the score of 8-2).

Upon returning to Holland, Philidor composed his *Treatise on Chess*, which was published in 1749 and quickly translated into English as well as German. It is to this work Philidor's famous dictum that pawns are the soul of chess can be traced.

And so Philidor's life continued, and the reader of *The Life of Philidor* will learn, in due course, of Frederick the Great, who was fond of chess, watching Philidor play in Potsdam on several occasions; of how in 1751 Philidor dumbfounded a Berlin audience by successfully playing three blindfold games simultaneously; and of many other marvels enacted long ago.

Philidor's success, both at the chessboard and with his church music, which he continued to compose, could not go unscathed, and it is not surprising to learn that a false rumor eventually circulated during his second visit to England, which extended for eight years, from 1746 through 1754, that no one could be both a

chess master and compose good music, and that clearly his church music was not really his own.

Surprisingly enough, or perhaps not surprisingly at all, it was with his return to Paris in November 1754 that Philidor in fact began his greatest period as a composer. His church music was no longer acceptable to French royalty due to the Italian influence he had incorporated into his work, and so it was that Philidor turned his hand to opera comique, a form in which his creative talents soared, and for which his place in French musical history was eventually assured.

Having no background in the intricacies of the history of music, I will confine the remainder of this summary of Philidor's life to his chess and the little we can learn about his person. On February 13, 1760, at the then-relatively late age of thirty-three, Philidor married the daughter of a composer and sister to three musicians. Philidor, who sired five sons and two daughters, allegedly never taught any of his children chess. Another curious aspect of Philidor's nature is that he appears to have been, for the most part, an amiable literalist. In a footnote more revealing of the character of his subject than several pages of dry fact might have recounted, Allen elaborated on his statement that Philidor "hardly knew if there be such a thing as wit," writing that "the only *bon mot* recorded of him appears to have been uttered very seriously, without the least thought of being witty. 'One day, he entered the house at the moment when two of his sons, of about fourteen and sixteen, were trying their strength at chess. He looked at their game, and after following it for two or three moves, said to his wife, *Ma chère amie*, our children have fairly succeeded in making chess a game of chance.'"

While Philidor is known from his letters for his simple frankness, a trait perhaps inherited from his mother, and while his ability at the chessboard was well documented, it appears less well known that the great player simply could not fathom a joke. According to Allen, one "merry relation" of Philidor, to test the chess player's inability to call a joke a joke, in a very serious voice announced that he wished that he was the owner of a carriage, so that he could sit at his window and see himself ride by. According to the account, Philidor "reflected for a moment, until he had analyzed the 'position,' and then remarked, 'What you have said there, my dear friend, is quite inconsiderate and foolish—you could not be at your window and in your carriage at the same moment; consequently, it would be impossible to see yourself ride by.'"

Such a story suggests Philidor would have made a better consultation partner than dinner guest.

His inability to recognize a joke aside, Philidor seems to have been such a generous spirit, if not a practical one, as to give away not only money but also his own clothes to needy musicians who would come calling. And the great man's days were rather predictable at this point in his life, with his mornings devoted to his music and his afternoons to play at the *Régence*. No doubt modern players would find Philidor's gyrations of body and twisting of limbs when playing chess a nuisance. That Philidor did not consciously engage in such antics seems fairly clear, as from his wife we learn he underwent similar contortions when alone, composing, at which time Philidor's wife said he was "playing the silkworm." In any event, Philidor's motions and even mumblings at the chessboard—he was said also to unconsciously talk nonsense to himself while concentrating—did not prevent the likes of Voltaire, Rousseau, and, later, Maximillien Robespierre, from flocking to the *Régence* to watch the great man play.

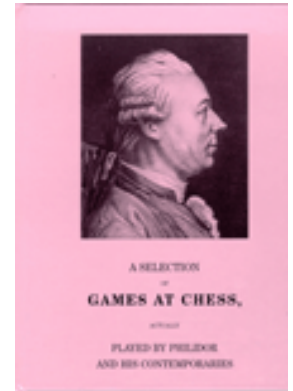
In 1774 a new English chess club was formed, which in turn offered Philidor "an inducement" to spend the London season, from February to June, at the club, with the added recognition that he could increase his earnings by offering exhibitions. Philidor accepted the offer and so for many years spent nearly half his time in England, sending as much of his salary and other income as he could home to his large family. It is to this later period in England that many of the surviving games played by Philidor belong, as will be discussed below.

Nor would Philidor escape the politics of the day. Initially he had high hopes for the French Revolution, but after the September Massacres of 1792, Philidor quickly made his way to England, not waiting for the February start to his London season. Allen believes Philidor did not return to France during 1793 or 1794 because of another *Café de la Régence* habitué, Robespierre, who might have seen Philidor not as the famous chessplayer, but rather as "the pensioner of two kings and the favorite of a fugitive pretender to the crown." In any event, Philidor remained in England, and kept his head.

Early in 1795, however, Philidor hoped to return to his native land, but that was not to be. He learned he was considered an émigré, a class held in abhorrence by the new ruling class. He

gave his last chess exhibition on June 20, 1795, playing two games blindfolded and a third with sight of the board. One of his three opponents was George Atwood, the mathematician and churchman, who recorded his game against the failing French giant, and who subsequently recorded two more games he played against Philidor at the *Régence* nine days later. This proved to be Philidor's last visit to the club. He would die on August 24, 1795.

For those wishing to learn the details of Philidor's life, only some of which have been touched on here, Allen's work is essential. Allen also speaks well of George Walker's *A Selection of Games at Chess, Actually Played by Philidor and His Contemporaries* (1835), a volume in existence for nearly thirty years by the time Allen published his biography. The full title, though awkward, is accurate, and anyone thinking of purchasing this volume in its current facsimile should know it contains forty-seven games by Philidor, all played at various odds, including fourteen against the same Atwood mentioned above. An additional twenty-five games by other players are included in the book, a number by the players Verdoni and, again, Atwood. Although the book was published nearly thirty years before Allen's biography, it thankfully has escaped the irritating use of "f" for "s" that the later book used, and so the modern reader will find the text easier going from the start. It should be noted, too, that while Walker's book contains in all seventy-two games, given with a sixteen page Preface, the Allen biography contains no chess games at all.



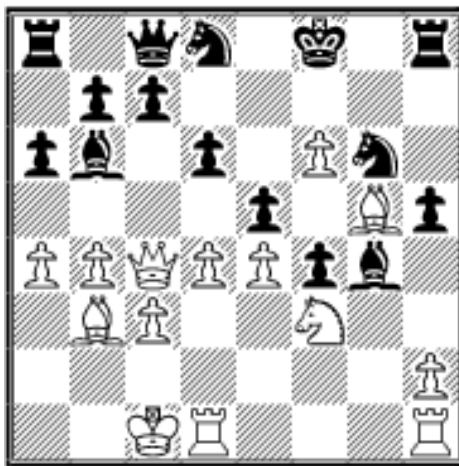
As Walker makes clear in his Preface, his producing the manuscript for the book really owed its thanks in large measure to Atwood, for it was his manuscript, composed after his time as a pupil of Philidor's, that had been given into the hands of a friend at the mathematician's death. When Atwood's friend died, his library was sold to a Covent Garden bookseller, who in turn sold the manuscript to Walker in 1833. Walker informs us that the play of most of the games in the volume was actually witnessed by Atwood, and thus there appears little doubt of their authenticity as true samples of Philidor's chess play, if only of a period late in Philidor's life (he was over sixty when these games were played), when it might be supposed the Frenchman's powers had diminished to some degree.

That Walker selected the games for inclusion in his book along the lines of fashion for his period cannot be denied. He notes, for instance, that “the most interesting games are invariably those in which one or two faults are committed; because the subsequent situations necessarily assume a more brilliant and diversified character, than during your tame exhibitions of perfect play, cold and hard, however rigidly accurate.” In short, Walker went for the spectacular, if unsound, over the correct but placid, in making his selections. As the readers of such a book, even today, are surely looking for entertainment rather than instruction, one can hardly fault him for his criteria. It but remains to show a sample or two of what the reader will find.

One bane of the chess historian that the casual reader of this game collection may overlook is the relative ease with which games of this period were published without reference to date or location of play. In Walker’s book, only slightly over half of Philidor’s games are dated (all ranging between 1788 and 1795, and thus from Philidor’s final years). Nor should today’s reader expect to learn much from the study of games played at odds, though they offer entertainment for those who are less interested in ratings and more interested in the historical development of the game. Here is an example of Philidor offering knight odds, as well as a sample of the kind of annotations appearing in the book. For purposes of this review, I give the game in modern notation. The two games that follow were essentially selected at random. The opening moves for the first game, as they appear in Walker’s book, in fact look as follows: 1.K.P. two sq., The same; 2.K.B.P. two sq., Q.Kt. to B. third. 3.K.Kt. to B. third., K.B. to Q.B. fourth., and so on. Potential buyers should keep in mind the antiquated notation appearing in Walker’s book.

Philidor - Atwood Remove White's Queen Knight

1.e4 e5 2.f4 Nc6 3.Nf3 Bc5 4.c3 It would be bad to take the e-pawn. **4...f6 5.Bc4 Nge7 6.Qe2 d6 7.f5 Bd7 8.b4 Bb6 9.a4 a6 10.d3 g6 11.g4 h5 12.g5 gxf5 13.gxf6 Ng6 14.Bg5 Qc8** It is obvious that Philidor threatens to win the Queen, by checking with pawn, and at the same time unmasking bishop. **15.0-0-0 f4 16.Bb3 Kf8 17.d4 Bg4 18.Qc4 Nd8**



19.dxe5 19.Bh6+ (If 19...Rhx6, he is mated on the move.) Ke8 20.f7+. If he takes ...Nxf7, you mate in three moves, and therefore he moves King, etc. Or instead of 20.f7+, 20.Bg7, but nothing can be demonstrated, and Philidor adopted sounder play. **19...Be6** If Philidor removes his Queen, King bishop must at least be lost, he therefore

prefers giving up rook. **20.Rd5 Be3+ 21.Kb2 c6 22.Qe2 cxd5 23.exd5 dxe5** He resolves to give up the bishop, rather than, by removing it, allowing the pawn to advance to e6. **24.dxe6 Nxe6 25.Qd3 Qe8 26.Bxe6 Qxe6** Atwood should probably have moved 26...Kf7, though play what he may, his adversary has a good game, considering he gives a piece. The move Qd3 is very strong. **27.Qxg6 1-0** *A Selection of Games of Chess*, George Walker, pp.46-47

Philidor gave odds of the move in the following game, though he also happened to play it without sight of the board. His opponent, Count de Bruhl, we are informed, "was one of the leading chess-players in England. His name is well known to all who have gone through Philidor's *Treatise*. Philidor could at this period have given Bruhl the knight, playing across the board. The Count afterwards advanced considerably in his knowledge of the game."

Count Bruhl - Philidor [C23] Blindfold Game May 6. 1787

1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 c6 3.Qe2 Nf6 4.d3 Bc5 5.Be3 Bxe3 6.fxe3 d6 7.c3 Be6 8.Bxe6 fxe6 9.Nh3 Nbd7 10.0-0 Qe7 11.Nd2 0-0 12.Kh1 d5 13.exd5 exd5 14.e4 dxe4 15.Nxe4 Nxe4 16.Qxe4 Rxf1+ 17.Rxf1 Nf6 18.Qc4+ Kh8 19.Qh4 h6 20.d4 exd4 21.Re1 Qf7 22.cxd4 Qh5 23.Qxh5 Nxh5 24.Re5



24...g5 Bad play. Losing a pawn immediately. 25.Re6 This move secures the gain of a pawn; for as the second player must move up King to defend pawn, Bruhl wins the b-pawn by checking. 25...Kg7 26.Re7+ Kg6 27.Rxb7 g4 28.Ng1 Rd8 29.Rxa7 Rxd4 30.Rc7 Rb4 31.a4 Rxa4 32.Rxc6+ Kg5 33.Rc5+ Kg6 34.Rb5 Ra1 35.g3 Rd1 36.b4

Rd2 37.Rb6+ Nf6 38.b5 Rb2 39.Rb8 Ne4 40.b6 Ng5 41.b7 Kh5 If he leave his King at g6, Bruhl would check with rook, and then Queen his pawn. 42.Rf8 Rxb7 43.Rf2 Rb1 44.Kg2 Rxb1+ 45.Kxg1 Nh3+ 46.Kg2 Nxf2 47.Kxf2 ½-½ *A Selection of Games at Chess*, George Walker, pp.28-29

These examples should suffice to alert the reader to the level of play he will find. On the other hand, anyone interested in expanding their collection to include more games by Philidor will find more of his games here than just about anywhere else. The few computer databases I have checked at most provide seven or eight examples of Philidor's play. Here, as noted above, appear forty-seven.

The ideal purchaser for these reprints will be the collector on a budget, who would like to examine samples of late eighteenth century chess play as well as learn something about one of the major figures in the history of chess. Those who purchase these volumes for such a purpose will not be disappointed. Those who do otherwise, likely will.

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