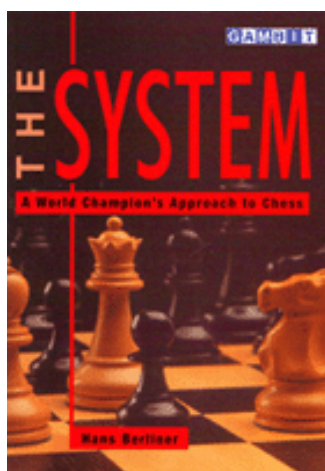




## BOOK REVIEWS

### *From the Archives*

Hosted by  
Mark Donlan



## From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the [ChessCafe](#) home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

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## Selling the Stairway to Heaven or, Weaver Was a Bargain

Taylor Kingston

*The System: A World Champion's Approach to Chess*, by Hans Berliner, 1999  
Gambit Publications, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 175pp., \$24.95

Back in the 1940s, there appeared in *Chess Review* small advertisements proclaiming boldly “The Game of Chess Solved!” For the even then low price of \$1.00, the reader was offered an opening system which, it was claimed, would win for White against any defense Black might put up. Left unsolved was the natural question of why the system’s author was not world champion. Though Weaver Adams of Massachusetts played in several U. S. Championships (never finishing higher than 8th), and won the 1948 U. S. Open, few considered his play superior to Botvinnik’s, and his system, based first on the Bishop’s Opening (1 e4 e5 2 Bc4) and later on the Vienna Game (1 e4 e5 2 Nc3), was derided more than embraced. Another claim to having found the ultimate secret of chess, Emil Diemer’s fervent advocacy of the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit (1 d4 d5 2 e4 exd4 3 Nc3 and 4 f3), met a similar reception a few years later.

Since then there have been few (if any) serious, let alone credible claims of finding a chessic Stairway to Heaven. Now, however, Dr. Hans Berliner has announced, in *The System*, that he has found The Answer (or most of it, anyway). Though Weaver Adams was his inspiration, Berliner comes with credentials Adams lacked, for he has indeed been a world champion, in the area of chess that comes closest to absolute truth: correspondence play, in which he compiled a record of +94 -1 =10 in the 1950s and '60s. He has also been heavily involved in designing chess algorithms for computers, his brainchild Hitech being one of the first programs to compete with strong human players. His claim must therefore be taken seriously; whether it is credible remains to be seen.

Berliner's premise is that White's original half-move advantage can, with correct play, be retained and amplified to bring about a forced win. Correct play, he says, is embodied in nine principles. In descending order of importance, these are:

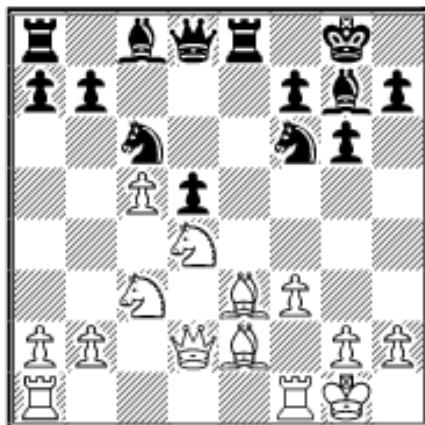
- (1) Tactics (i.e. avoid blunders, capitalize on mistakes);
- (2) Piece Location (optimal placement);
- (3) Development;
- (4) Board Control;
- (5) Options;
- (6) Response Pairs (i.e. attention to forced responses);
- (7) Transpositions (i.e. do not allow Black to transpose to a more favorable position than another he can be forced into);
- (8) Resolution (avoid resolving issues such as central pawn tension until all possible concessions have been derived from them); and
- (9) Attack a fixed target or gain space.

A move such as 1 g3 violates principle #5, because it is unnecessarily committal, and possibly violates #2, since g2 may not turn out to be optimal for the bishop. Adams' error, Berliner believes, was in starting with 1 e4, which controls only two squares (d5 and f5) and thus is inferior by principle #4 to 1 d4, which controls three squares (c5, d4, and e5).

Thus 1 d4 is the first of what he calls system moves. A system move will consistently advance one or more of the nine principles' aims and exert the greatest pressure on Black. Thus after 1 d4 Nf6, the system move is not 2 Nf3, which redundantly touches d4 and e5, but rather 2 c4, which increases board control by hitting at d5.

Applying these principles over nearly 50 years of play and analysis, Berliner believes he has found the best lines against most major black responses to 1 d4. Essentially refuted, he says, are several forms of the Queen's Gambit Declined (Orthodox, Tarrasch, and Semi-Tarrasch defenses), the Grünfeld, the Modern Benoni, and the Benko Gambit (though the Queen's Gambit Accepted still needs a lot of work, and the Slav and Nimzo-Indian still have him stumped). Analyses of these openings makes up the bulk of *The System*. We gloss over a few lines here.

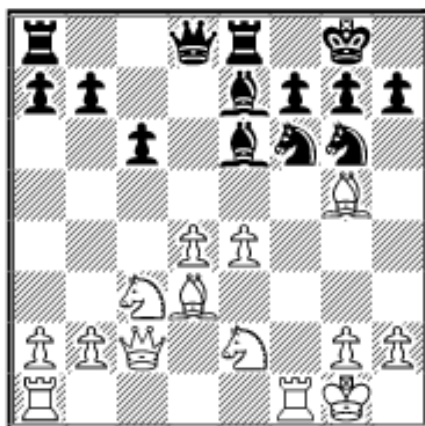
Against the Benko, 1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 b5 4 bxc4 a6, Berliner advocates 5 f3, and presents some challenging analysis considered little (if at all) since the gambit came into vogue about 30 years ago. Not refuted but definitely under a cloud, he says, is the King's Indian, against which he advocates a form of Sämisch variation: 1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 g6 3 Nc3 Bg7 4 e4 d6 5 f3 0-0 6 Be3 followed by Nge2 and featuring an avoidance of the usual d4-d5 advance; for example, 6 e5 7 Nge2 c6 8 Qd2, when if 8 exd4 9 Nxd4 d5 10 exd5! cxd5 11 c5 Nc6 12 Be2 Re8 13 0-0,



“with an excellent position.”

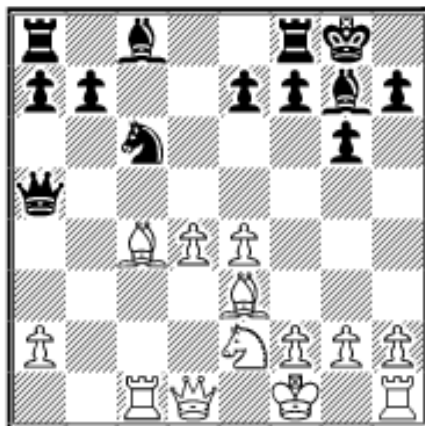
If Black tries instead 6 Nc6, Berliner advocates a “space-grab” with 7 Rb1 intending 8 b4 (a recurrent theme, in keeping with his principle #9). Critical here is the Byrne variation: 6...c6 7 Bd3 a6 8 Nge2 b5, which Berliner believes is adequately dealt with by 9 cxb5 and either 9...cxb5 ceding White a clear central superiority, or 9...axb5 10 b4!, another queenside space-grab. He asserts that a similar maneuver in the Modern Benoni “wins hands down.”

Against the QGD, he claims a virtual forced win with the Exchange Variation, a sample line being: 1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3 d5 4 cxd5 (important it be done at this point) 4...exd5 5 Bg5 c6 6 e3 Be7 7 Qc2 (preventing 7 Ne4? due to 8 Bxe7 Qxe7 9 Nxd5!) 7 0-0 8 Bd3 Nbd7 9 Nge2 (Berliner has a decided preference for leaving the f-pawn unblocked) 9...Re8 10 0-0 Nf8 11 f3 Ng6 12 e4 dxe4 13 fxe4 Be6, reaching a position from Berliner-Zagorovsky, 5th World Correspondence Championship final, 1965-68.



Now after 14 Bxf6 Bxf6 15 e5 Be7 16 Rad1 Bf8, he believes “White stands considerably better,” and should win with best play on both sides.

In the Grünfeld, Berliner's critical line is 1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 g6 3 Nc3 d5 4 cxd5 Nxd5 5 e4 Nxc3 6 bxc3 Bg7 7 Bc4 c5 8 Ne2 0-0 9 Be3 Nc6 10 Rc1. Berliner calls this “the system and winning move.” 10...Qa5 11 Kf1!! (his punctuation) cxd4 12 cxd4,



intending h4-h5 to attack the black king “with overwhelming energy.”

Some interesting ideas, to be sure, but do they qualify as refutations? This reviewer makes no pretense of great openings expertise, but we harbor certain doubts. In the above Grünfeld line, for example, Berliner surprisingly never considers 12...Qa3, which goes back at least to Browne-Kudrin, Philadelphia Open 1992, and was given considerable notoriety by Kamsky-Anand, Las Palmas 1995. After 12...Qa3, Berliner’s intended 13 h4 is met by 13...Bg4, because 14 f3 is no longer possible. A quick database search found nothing but draws in this line.

In the Orthodox QGD, Berliner discusses only the move order 1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3 d5, never 1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3, when Black can play 3...Be7, thus avoiding 4 cxd5 exd5 5 Bg5, which Berliner considers essential after 3 Nf6. If after 3 Be7, White replies 4 Nf3, he forfeits the later possibility of f2-f3 and e3-e4, so important in the above example. After 4 cxd5 exd5, the only playable move allowing a transposition to Berliner’s “system” line seen above would seem to be 5 Qc2, when Black still has the waiting move 5...c6, after which White would appear to have no choice but to commit to a “non-system” line with 6 Bc4, Nf3, or something even more innocuous such as 6 e3 or a3. Against 3 Be7, the “system move” would appear to be 4 e4, but this eventually peters out to equality after 4 dxe4 5 Nxe4 Nf6.

Thus while Berliner espouses opening principles that certainly seem sound, we cannot yet agree that they produce the results claimed for them. He presents a mixed bag of ideas, some clearly strong or at least interesting (e.g. on the Benko, Benoni and KID), others dubious or at least not given sufficient support (e.g. Grünfeld and QGD). Chess openings have amazing resiliency, and historically it has proven perilous to announce refutations. One need only recall how the Sicilian Dragon was considered dead in the early 1960s, yet this “refuted” opening was used with success by Kasparov against Anand in their 1995 world title match. The interested student will probably benefit from Berliner’s approach, but should definitely keep grains of salt handy at certain points.

Nor can we agree that Berliner’s principles actually constitute a “system.” One point of a system is to provide a set of general tenets that reduce the need for specific analysis, something like the way the principles of arithmetic eliminate the need to count on one’s fingers. Yet fairly often in *The System* we find sentences like “Only after hundreds of hours was I able to find the system move in this position.” How, then, does “the system” differ from ordinary analysis, the nitty-gritty of exhaustive specifics that has been the acid test of openings at

least since Bilguer? This also occasionally gives Berliner's verdicts a quality of 20-20 hindsight, rather than the foresight he claims for his theory when comparing it to Mendeleev's periodic table of elements.

Furthermore, if *The System* is as comprehensive as claimed, much is missing in the presentation of it here. If, for example, 1 d4 is the only correct first move, *The System* should generate antidotes for Black to supposedly inferior but commonly played moves such as 1 e4, c4, or Nf3. Yet little or no discussion is given on this.

Disputes over openings aside, there is considerable instructive value in the book. Berliner rationally evaluates development not in terms of how many pieces have been moved, but by how many moves are yet required to get one's pieces to their best squares. He proposes some interesting fine-tuning of the standard 1-3-3-5-9 material values of the pieces, and of pawns based on how far they are advanced and on the game situation. For example, in the opening, an unpassed a- or h-pawn on the 6th rank (i.e. white pawn on h6 or black pawn on h3) is worth 1.06 while a d- or e-pawn on the 6th rates 1.40. In the endgame, this valuation inverts, the center pawns dropping to 1.05 while the a- and h-pawns on the 6th jump to 1.45. A similar table is given for passed pawns, ranging from an isolated 4th-rank passer (1.30) to a connected passer on the 6th (3.5!). Most worthless? An unpassed, doubled, isolated a- or h-pawn: 0.33. There is also a worthwhile, if all too brief, discussion of pattern recognition, for which Berliner uses the odd and unpleasant term "chunking."

More unpleasant to this reviewer, though, is the presumptuousness that occasionally surfaces. A statement such as "Lasker understood [chess dynamics] to some degree" conveys a disagreeable tone of condescension, and to say "[My theory] is as real as the theories of Gravitation and Evolution" ventures into arrogance. Berliner does not shrink from implying he has hit upon "**The** theory of chess, not just **my** theory," (emphasis in original) and predicts that "if the analyses of the Queen's Gambit Declined and the Grünfeld Defence are correct, then the future will certainly bring further refutations, and chess will be a solved game by the year 2030." There is considerable similarity between these grandiose pronouncements and the ex cathedra edicts of Tarrasch, or Capablanca's lamentations at the imminent "draw death" of chess, in the early decades of this century. And, one hopes, similar validity. One imagines mid-21st century annotators making patronizing comments on Fischer's games like "As is now known, 1 e4 is at best good for a draw," and shudders. On the other hand, while Berliner's presumption may offend, it can't be denied that many of the most noteworthy advancers of chess theory (e.g. Steinitz, Nimzovitch, Alekhine, Botvinnik) have also been extreme egotists.

Does that correlation hold in Berliner's case? Rather than chess dying by 2030, a safer bet would be that opening theory will continue with its usual dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis for the foreseeable future, with sufficient complexity that no "final solution" comes in sight. There is the possibility that Berliner is entirely right, but for the time being it seems more prudent to view *The System* not as the Stairway to Heaven but as a work in progress, one interesting path

among many, leading to some answers, some dead ends, and some of what scientists call “fruitful errors.” Those who don’t consider 25 bucks too high a price for a stairway with a good many missing steps (Weaver Adams at least was cheap!) will find instructive value here, but probably not as much as Berliner asserts.

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[Order](#) *The System*  
by Hans Berliner

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