



COLUMNISTS

Over the Horizons

Stefan Bucker



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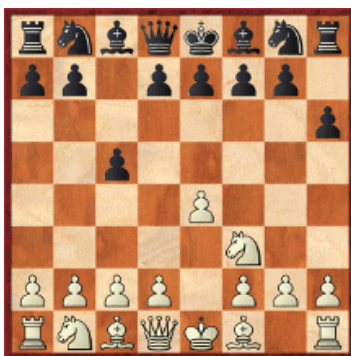
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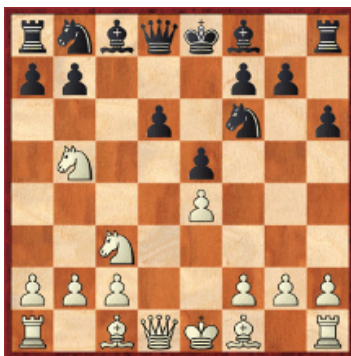
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Pachman's Verdict

The book *The Easiest Sicilian* (by Kolev and Nedev) covers a repertoire for Black mainly based on the Sveshnikov Variation. Certainly the Sveshnikov is a sound system, and it is relatively easy to understand, because the characteristic pawn structure with black pawns on e5 and d6 and a hole on d5 limits the possibilities for both sides. But there are other systems in the Sicilian Defense which are, in my opinion, easier to learn. One of my personal favorites is **1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 h6**.



In spite of the strange appearance of Black's second move the set-up is more reasonable than it looks. The concept was developed in the 1980s in cooperation with Gerard Welling (Netherlands), we tested it in several games. My article of six pages published in *NIC Yearbook 18* (1990) called it the Bucker-Welling Variation. A recent database reveals at least three earlier games, played in 1967 by Werner Stephan (Germany). A key idea is the continuation 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 e5 6 Ndb5 d6, already played by W. Stephan, when the move h7-h6 is more useful in respect to the coming fight for square d5 than Sveshnikov's Nc6.



The pin Bg5 is avoided, and the Nb8 can often go directly to d7 instead of taking the long way Nb8-c6-b8-d7, as in some lines of the Sveshnikov. Every white knight that arrives at d5 will be mercilessly exchanged. Altogether Black seems so much better prepared for the positional fight ahead that I used to regard 2...h6 as an improved version of the Sveshnikov. In a game Schönthier – Bucker, German Championship Bad Neuenahr 1984, White played:

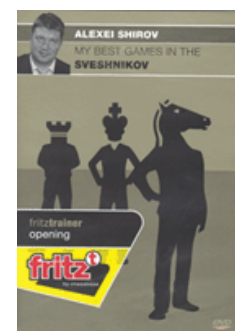
7 Be3

On the straightforward 7 Nd5 Nxd5 8 Qxd5 my article gave 8...Be7! (8...a6? is premature because of 9 Bc4) 9 Be3 a6 10 Nc3 (or 10 Na7 Nd7) Nd7 followed by 11...Nf6 (=) [1], but Werner Stephan's solution was by no means worse: 8...Nc6 9 Be3 a6 10 Nc3 Be6 11 Qd2 Rc8 = (0-1, 50) Bernhard

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7...a6 8 Na3 b5 9 Nd5 Nbd7 10 c4

"A defensive move. In view of Black's intended 10...Bb7 White reinforces his central predominance" [1].

10...b4!



Black has successfully solved his opening problems. Instead of 11 Nxb4 Qa5 12 Nac2 Nxe4 [1] or 12...Bb7 13 Be2 d5, with unclear play, or 11 Nc2 a5 with rough equality, Frank Schönthier now blundered and lost: 11 Qa4? Nxd5 12 cxd5 bxc3 13 b4 Be7 -+ (0-1, 23).



*Ludek Pachman (1924-2003) during the German Championship, Bad Neuenahr 1984
Photo: archive St. Bucker*

The Critical Reply 3 c3

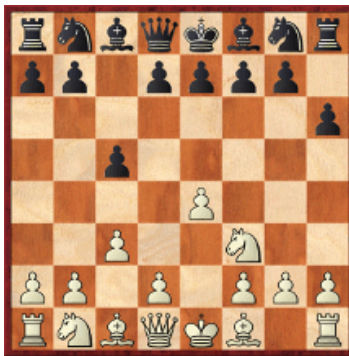
The theoretician Ludek Pachman participated in the same German championship at Bad Neuenahr 1984, where the game Schönthier – Bucker took place. In his book *Halboffene Spiele*, Pachman later commented on 2...h6 "(!?)": "A truly extravagant move with the aim of preparing for the advance e7-e5. But after 3 Nc3, 3 c3 or 3 c4 this continuation shows itself to be pointless and a weakening of Black's own position."

The reaction of Graham Burgess in *101 Chess Opening Surprises* (1998) was similar. On the last page of the book he listed "Bucker's 2...h6" as one of three ideas "that didn't quite justify a full page in the book" (Burgess), earning only a question mark for their soundness or surprise value. Burgess said, "By playing 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 h6, Black intends 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 e5, when after 6 Ndb5 d6, he gets a Pelikan-type position where White cannot play Bg5. However, cute though that idea is, if White plays some other third move (e.g. 3 c3) it is hard to see Black justifying ...h6." [2]

A third voice in the choir, from Eric Schiller in *Unorthodox Chess Openings*, New York 1998: "2...h6. This early commitment by Black can be exploited by White only by very careful strategic planning." [3]. – Schiller [3] hovers

between 3 d4 ("the normal Sicilian strategy") and 3 c3 (a sensible alternative"), but at least these theoreticians all agree that 3 c3 is one of the hardest tests for Black's strategy.

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 h6 3 c3



In analogy to 2...a6, another move that hopes for 3 d4?! cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 e5!, the text move may be critical. Other alternatives were covered in more detail in [1]. Here I give only some hints:

(a) 3 d4 cxd4 4 c3 dxc3 5 Nxc3, in Morra Gambit style, was tried in Marxen – Steffens, Schleswig-Holstein 1991 (0-1, 65). The sacrifice can be declined by 4...Nf6 5 e5 Nd5, which transposes to our main line.

(b) 3 b3 d6 4 Bb5+ (4 Bb2 e5; or 4 d4 cxd4 5 Nxd4 Nf6 6 Nc2 Nc6, about =, Nagy – Welling, Budapest 1984 [1]) 4...Bd7 and Black has a solid position.

(c) 3 c4 g5 is a position that could also arise via Myers' Defense 1 c4 g5 (an unusual topic on which Maurits Wind wrote in *Kaissiber* 34), but the position of White's knight on f3 improves Black's chances: 4 d4 (4 h3 costs time, but may be better) 4...g4!? (the article [1] discusses 4...Bg7 5 d5 d6) 5 Ng1 (both 5 Nh4 e5! or 5 Ne5? cxd4 6 Qxd4 Bg7 must be worse for White) 5...cxd4 6 Qxd4 Nf6 7 Nc3 Nc6 8 Qd1 d6 9 Nge2 Bd7



The weaknesses in Black's pawn structure are compensated by his active pieces. The chances are roughly even.

(d) 3 Nc3 d6! (in [1] I had recommended the hazardous 3...g5?! 4 d4 g4?, when Black is simply lost after 5 Ne5 cxd4 6 Bc4 e6 7 Qxd4) 4 d4 (4 Bb5+!? Bd7; or 4 Bc4 e5) 4...cxd4 5 Nxd4 (5 Qxd4 Bd7 comes into consideration) 5...Nf6 transposes to a little-played, but interesting system.



The early h7-h6 restricts White's options, 6 Bc4 e5 7 Bb5+ at least gains a tempo on a double-edged variation, and 6 a4 g6!? is an improved Dragon. In the diagrammed position, White probably has nothing better than 6 Be3 a6! (6...e5 7 Bb5+ was good for White in Vuckovic – Popovic, Zlatibor 2007, and Navara – Vokac, Pardubice 2002) 7 f3 (if 7 Qd2, the reply 7...Ng4 is an option, because g5 is not available to the bishop):



(d1) 7...e6 8 Qd2 Nbd7 9 0-0-0 b5 10 g4 Bb7 11 h4 Rc8 (=, 41) Sölter – Werner Stephan, Detmold 1966.

(d2) 7...e5! 8 Nb3 Be6 9 Qd2 Nbd7 10 0-0-0, and we are entering a main line of the Najdorf Variation, where the move h7-h6 is often played as a reaction to White's g2-g4. It isn't obvious how White could profit from Black's slightly unusual move-order. To claim that 2...h6 were "easier to learn" than other second moves, and then transpose to a line of the Najdorf Variation may be considered as a contradiction. But you can't have everything. May it suffice to say that after 2...h6 few White players will be inclined to transpose to regular main lines without a fight.

3...Nf6

A reasonable response, strangely ignored in my article [1].

4 e5 Nd5 5 d4



Against the O'Kelly Variation of the Sicilian Defense, 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 a6!?, the analogous treatment 3 c3 Nf6 (3...d5 is a major alternative) 4 e5 Nd5 5 d4 is regarded as one of the critical lines. The database contains 150 games with the latter position, and famous players like Barcza, Prins, Stahlberg, Kholmov,

Kortchnoi, Gurgeni and Ikonnikov were fighting for Black's cause. Here isn't the place to discuss this situation, and the practical results have not been overwhelming. But it isn't obvious (at least to me) that a7-a6 must be more useful than the move h7-h6 in the diagrammed situation. While the a6-version has been a regular guest on the boards, there is not a single game in the database with the analogous h7-h6 position. Instead of the text move, 5 Bc4 Nb6 6 Bb3 d5 7 exd6 Qxd6! (7...exd6 8 d4 c4 9 Bc2 Be6 10 d5! is a promising gambit; e.g., 10...Bxd5 11 a4 a5 12 0-0 Be7 13 Nd4 0-0 14 Bxh6) gives Black an acceptable position – again the analogous case with the move a6 is less attractive (8 d4!).

5...cxd4 6 cxd4

(a) In the O'Kelly Variation (a6 instead of h6), 6 Bc4! Nb6 7 Bb3 is a critical continuation; for example, 6...Nb6 7 Bb3 dxc3? 8 Ng5 or 8 Nxc3 followed by Ne4 and Bg5 with a strong attack. Because of the move h6, in our case the gambit may be "acceptable" for Black. Another treatment that only works in the h6-version is 6 Bc4 e6!? 7 Bxd5 exd5 8 Qxd4 Nc6! 9 Qxd5 d6



Both 10 Bf4 Qb6! 11 Qb3 Qa6 (11...dxe5!?) 12 exd6 Be6 13 Qa3 Qc4 14 Be3 Qd3 15 Nbd2 Bxd6 16 Qa4 0-0 17 Rd1 Qg6 18 0-0 Rad8 and 10 exd6 Bxd6 11 Qe4+ Be6 give Black excellent compensation for the sacrificed pawn. Note that in the last case, if Black had the pawn on a6 instead of h6, 12 Ng5 +/- would be a clear refutation.

(b) 6 Qxd4 e6 deserves attention: 7 Be2 (7 Bc4 Nc6 8 Qe4 d6 0-0 dxe5 10 Nxe5 Qc7, or 9 exd6 Nf6 =) 7...Nc6 8 Qe4 d6 9 0-0 dxe5 10 Nxe5



10...Bd6 (10...Qc7 11 Nxc6 bxc6 12 c4 Nf6 13 Bf4 Nxe4 14 Bxc7 Bd6 15 Bxd6 Nxd6 16 c5 +=; or perhaps 10...Nxe5 11 Qxe5 Qd6) 11 Nxc6 bxc6 12 c4 Ne7 13 Bf4 Bxf4 14 Qxf4 Qa5 and Black has almost equalized. In comparison to the O'Kelly, the advantages of the move h7-h6 are less visible in the 6 Qxd4 e6 line, but wait: 7 Nbd2 Nc6 8 Qe4 f5 (or 8...d6 9 Nc4 dxe5 10 Nxe5 Bd6 Kranzl – Holzke, Budapest 1991) 9 exf6 Qxf6!, and h7-h6 may prepare a later g5, or at least it prevents Bg5.

6...d6! 7 Nc3

7 Bc4 is a serious alternative that is perhaps more precise than the text move. In situations with O'Kelly's move a6 it happened in eighteen games, but not a single example is available for our case, where a6 is replaced by h6. After 7...e6 8 0-0 (8 Bxd5 exd5 is pointless) 8...Nc6 9 Qe2 Be7 10 Nc3!? Nxc3 11

bxc3 d5 12 Bd3 Bd7, Black's king will stay in the center (+=). An active solution such as 11...dxe5 12 dxe5 Qc7, even if objectively riskier, would be more to my taste.

7...Be6!



Motivated by the additional h6, which prevents Ng5. The text move seems flexible enough to guarantee sufficient counterplay, more in the spirit of an Alekhine's Defense (the combined attack on e5) than of a Sicilian Defense.

8 Bd3 Nc6 9 0-0

There is nothing better: 9 Be4 dxe5, resp. 9 Be3 g5 10 exd6 Qxd6, about =.

9...g5 10 Qe2

10 h3 is a bit slow: 10...dxe5 11 Nxe5 Nxe5 12 dxe5 Bg7 13 Bb5+ Kf8 14 Qe2 Nxc3 15 bxc3 Rc8 16 Rb1 Rc5! unclear.

10...g4 11 Nh4



The position is completely unclear. For example, 11...dxe5 12 dxe5 Bg7 13 Bf5 Nxc3 14 bxc3 Bxf5 15 Nxf5 Bxe5 16 Qxg4 Qc7 17 Ng7+ Kf8 18 Nf5 Bxh2+ 19 Kh1 Be5. White has some compensation for his sacrificed pawn.

Against 2...h6, Ludek Pachman listed the same antidotes that are generally recommended against O'Kelly's 2...a6, namely 3 Nc3, 3 c3 and 3 c4. There is nothing wrong with advice based on analogy, but when we look closer, both a6 and h6 include a great number of hidden ideas. In fact, neither 3 Nc3 nor 3 c4 are too impressive. Those who are willing to explore 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 h6 may find their own "easiest Sicilian." Pachman's verdict that h6 weakens Black's position may be true, but to prove such a theoretical belief over the board, White still has to make many strong moves. And maybe White should avoid two of Ludek Pachman's own suggestions: 3 Nc3 and 3 c4.

Sources:

- [1] S. B cker: "The B cker-Welling Variation 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 h6?!", in: *NIC Yearbook 18* (1990).
- [2] G. Burgess: *101 Chess Opening Surprises*, London 1998.
- [3] E. Schiller: *Unorthodox Chess Openings*, New York 1998.

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