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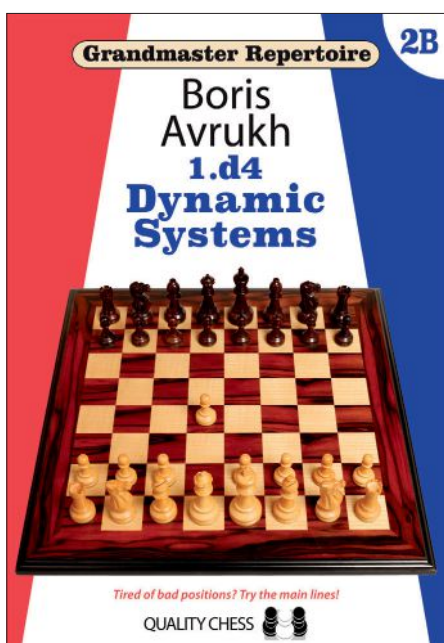The largest team event in the world
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Avrukh's Repertoire

Chicago-based grandmaster Boris Avrukh's fourth Grandmaster Repertoire *volume marks the end of an era.*

By **JOHN HARTMANN**

WITH THE PUBLICATION OF *Grandmaster Repertoire 2B: 1. d4 Dynamic Systems*, the fourth and final volume in his revised White 1. d4 repertoire and his 10th title published with Quality Chess, GM Boris Avrukh has announced that he is taking "a break" from book publishing. It is, at least for now, the end of an era.

When Avrukh published the first edition of his 1. d4 repertoire in 2008 and 2010, the effect was nothing short of revolutionary. He coupled astute opening choices with world championship level analysis—Avrukh seconded Gelfand in the 2012 World Championship match with Anand—to create a professional, poisonous two volume repertoire that anyone could buy for $65.

Opening theory never stops moving, of course, and with the appearance of *Grandmaster Repertoire 2B*, Avrukh has completed the revision and expansion of his repertoire. What was two volumes is now four. Two—*1A* (2015) and *1B* (2016)—focus on 1. d4 d5, including the Catalan, Queen's Gambit Accepted, the Slav, the Tarrasch, etc. Two more—*2A* (2018) and *2B* (2019)—treat everything else, including the King's Indian, Grünfeld, Dutch, Benko, and so forth.

While statistics show that the Catalan was already in ascendance when *Grandmaster Repertoire 1* was published, Avrukh's influence on the popularization of the opening cannot be overstated, and I would argue that it was his treatment of the Catalan that made his name in the chess publishing world. His analysis in *GM Repertoire 1* reshaped both the theory and practice of the system, and again, we can see his influence in database statistics.

Avrukh's original recommendation in the Open Catalan—1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. g3 d5 4. Nf3 Be7 5. Bg2 0-0 6. 0-0 dxc4 7. Qc2 a6 and now 8. Qxc4 instead of 8. a4—took a somewhat neglected move and reinvigorated it. The relative popularity of 8. Qxc4 spiked after *Grandmaster Repertoire 1* was published in 2008, and then waned after Avrukh argued for 8. a4 in *1A*.

Correlation is not causation, and Black improvements after 8. Qxc4 no doubt contributed to this shift. But the fact remains that Avrukh's books have had a palpable effect on opening theory at even the highest levels. The same can be said for his Anti-Slav ideas. His move order against Meran-style setups—1. d4 d5 2. c4 c6 3. Nf3 Nf6 4. e3 e6 5. b3!?—was little known before he wrote about it, and today it is one of the main ways that White tries to eke out an advantage against the Slav.

While Avrukh tweaks his recommendations in *1A* and *1B*, he does not fundamentally alter his repertoire. There is the shift to 8. a4 in the Open Catalan, as discussed above, a move from 3. e3 to 3. e4 in the Queen's Gambit Accepted, and the replacement of 10. Nd2 in the mainline Fianchetto Benoni with 10. Bf4. The basic contours of his 1. d4 Nf6 and 1. d4 "varia" repertoires also remain the same in the revised *Grandmaster Repertoires 2A* and *2B*.

Fianchetto setups are integral to Avrukh's repertoire against the Grünfeld and King's Indian in *2A*. Against the "Solid Grünfeld" he offers 1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. g3 c6 4. Bg2 d5 5. Qa4!?, hoping to prevent Black from recapturing on d5 with a pawn. The "Dynamic Grünfeld" builds upon his *Grandmaster Repertoire 2* analysis, and the bulk of the book (nearly 80 percent) is a revised and extended treatment of his ideas in the Fianchetto King's Indian.

This leaves the sundry defenses that many 1. d4 players dread: the Dutch, the Benko, and the Budapest, along with the odd sidelines that strong players trot out from time to time. *Grandmaster Repertoire 2B* offers remedies for all of these, and it's worth spending some time looking at three specific prescriptions to get a sense of Avrukh's style and analysis.

(1) One of Avrukh's more prominent ideas in *Grandmaster Repertoire 2* came in the Classical Dutch. After **1. d4 f5 2. g3 Nf6 3. Bg2 e6 4. c4 Be7 5. Nf3 0-0 6. 0-0 d6 7. Nc3 Ne4 8. Nxe4 fxe4 9. Nd2 d5 10. f3 Nc6** and here Avrukh recommended 11. fxe4 Rxf1+ 12. Nxf1 dxc4 13. Be3 in *Grandmaster Repertoire 2*, but Simon Williams' improvement 13. ... Bd7! (Sen-Williams, Uxbridge 2010) led Avrukh to search for another path forward. **(see diagram top of next column)**

His new idea is **11. e3!? exf3 12. Nxf3**, when "[t]he position resembles a Catalan, except that the f-pawns have been removed." (*2B*, 78) This seems a canny choice, fitting with the larger contours of Avrukh's repertoire: playing for a positional advantage and limiting the opponent's dynamism. That Stockfish 10 approves it also doesn't hurt! Avrukh analyzes two continuations.

   a. **12. ... b6** is seen in a correspondence game: **13. Bd2 Bb7 14. Rc1 Qd6 15. Qc2 Rac8 16. cxd5 exd5 17. b4!** (Oppermann,P-Prystenski,A, ICCF email 2016)

   b. **12. ... Bf6 13. Bd2 a5 14. Rc1 Kh8** and now instead of 15. Ne1 (Schmid-Halkias, Wunsiedel 2014) Avrukh analyzes the novelty **15. Rf2!?** with good prospects for White.

(2) The Benko Gambit is often dreaded by club players. Black sacrifices a pawn for what appears to be solid compensation and plays on "auto-pilot," making typical moves while White sweats her way through the middle-game, frantically clutching her extra pawn. Avrukh shifts in *2B* from his earlier recommendation of the Fianchetto Variation to the now-trendy 12. a4 "King-Walk," and he also gives White a weapon against a new sideline in the Benko.

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 c5 3. d5 b5 4. cxb5 a6 5. bxa6 g6!?

Postponing the pawn capture is a new idea, and the subject of Milos Perunovic's very interesting *The Modernized Benko Gambit.* Benko players have flocked to it, largely because of the current problems in the Benko proper.

Avrukh follows current theoretical trends in the "old" Benko by recommending 5. ... Bxa6 6. Nc3 g6 7. e4 Bxf1 8. Kxf1 d6 9. Nf3 Bg7 10. g3 0-0 11. Kg2 Nbd7 12. a4!. White is currently scoring very well in this line championed by none other than Magnus Carlsen (via transposition). See Carlsen-Bologan, Biel 2012.

6. Nc3 Bg7 7. e4 0-0 (7. ... Qa5 8. a7!) **8. a7!**

"The most dangerous idea for Black. White's idea is clear: with Black's rook on a7, he can always win a tempo with Nb5. Now we can't play ... Qa5 because after Bd2, White has the threat Nb5." (Perunovic, 109)

Avrukh notes that we can't play 8. Nf3 because of 8. ... Qa5! when the pin and attack on e4 forces us to choose between 9. Bd2 and 9. Nd2.

8. ... Rxa7 9. Nf3 e6

Perunovic's recommendation. Black has a few alternatives: 9. ... d6 10. Be2 Ba6 11. 0-0; 9. ... Qa5 10. Bd2!; and 9. ... Qb6 10. Be2 Ba6 11. 0-0.

10. Be2 exd5 11. exd5 d6 12. 0-0 Na6

If 12. ... Ba6 Avrukh likes 13. Re1, which provides "a [simple] route to an edge."

13. Nb5 Rd7 14. Bc4 Bb7 15. Bg5

Perunovic analyzes this position out to move 18, saying that Black has compensation for the pawn. Avrukh extends that analysis to move 23 and thinks that White gets the better end of things.

(3) After recommending 4. Nf3 against the Budapest in *Grandmaster Repertoire 2*, Avrukh turns to a little-known sideline to justify his new selection, 4. Bf4.

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e5 3. dxe5 Ng4 4. Bf4 g5

Avrukh had avoided this line in *Grandmaster Repertoire 2*, feeling that 5. Bg3 Bg7 was "quite reliable for Black." He revises his opinion in *2B*, having found a "powerful antidote ... [that is] both easier to learn and objectively stronger, in my opinion." (339, 340)

Note that White is said to get an advantage after the alternative 4. ... Nc6 5. Nf3 Bb4+ 6. Nbd2 Qe7 7. e3 Ngxe5 8. Nxe5 Nxe5 9. Be2 0-0 10. 0-0 Bxd2 11. Qxd2 d6 12. b4, preparing c4-c5.

5. Bd2!? Nxe5 6. Nf3 Bg7

After 6. ... Nbc6 7. Nc3 d6 8. Qc2 Bg7 9. 0-0-0 Avrukh's analysis runs to move 16, giving White a strong edge.

7. Nxe5 Bxe5 8. Nc3! d6 9. g3 Nc6 10. Bg2 Be6 11. Nd5 g4 (Dreev-Zwardon, Warsaw 2013) and now **12. Bf4 h5 13. Qd2** "with a clear positional advantage."

What do these examples teach us about Avrukh's work in *2B*, and about his repertoire more broadly? Keeping in mind the impossibility of summarizing nearly 1,800 pages of analysis, we can perhaps draw a few conclusions.

It's clear that Avrukh has done his due diligence in these books. He cites all the relevant sources and attempts to improve on each of them. Avrukh makes extensive use of correspondence games in his research, and he's not ashamed to mention the (heavy) influence of the computer in his recommendations. Very few authors meet the standard of excellence Avrukh sets in these books.

What about the repertoire itself? My sense is that Avrukh's recommendations tend to follow the Quality Chess shibboleth to "try the main lines." There are no dodgy gambits here, but mainly concrete, positionally-oriented variations that allow White to aim for a two-result game. This explains, in part, the use of the kingside fianchetto against the King's Indian (and Grünfeld). His recommended lines minimize Black's attacking chances and force the game into more controlled channels.

Who should adopt Avrukh's repertoire? Because it is concrete and positionally oriented, some of the key positions require serious technique to convert the small edge he claims. (I'm particularly thinking of his recommendations in the Catalan.) This is high-level chess, and it's probably best suited for experts at minimum. That's not to say that class players can't learn something here, but the kinds of advantages that Avrukh aims for with White—sometimes just a "space advantage and bishop pair," as he says in *Grandmaster Repertoire 1* (11)—often barely register as advantages on the amateur level.

Because Avrukh's analysis is so vast and detailed, some kind of "executive summary" of key recommendations would have been welcome. Some Quality Chess opening book—I'm thinking of *Kotronias' GM Repertoire 18: The Sicilian Sveshnikov* in particular—have summaries after each chapter that, in themselves, could function as a first repertoire. The chapter summaries here are perfunctory at best, and it's an opportunity missed.

As Avrukh steps back from book publishing, it remains to be seen what is next for the Chicago-based grandmaster. One of his web projects, *Chess Openings 24-7*, discontinued its services as of April 2nd. He has authored an opening file for *modern-chess.com* as recently as March 16th of this year; see our May 2017 issue for a review of a similar effort. Will he continue in this vein? Will he keep writing at all? Like many fans of chess literature, I'll be interested in finding out.

Nota Bene: In the interest of full disclosure, I took a one-time lesson with Boris Avrukh in 2017, mainly focused on his understanding of best practices for ChessBase and engine use. I have had no other substantial contact with him since then. ♦