

Introduction

Returning to the Italian Game

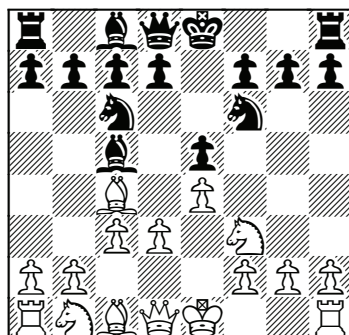
The Italian Game (1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♞c6 3 ♙c4) occupies a very special place in the order of chess openings. Not only is it one of the oldest recorded openings in chess history – its existence has been recognized for hundreds of years; it’s also the first opening that many players learn, especially those who begin chess at an early age. (For the record, I don’t count Scholar’s Mate as an opening!)

As we progress and mature, we tend to move on to more sophisticated openings. I say ‘more sophisticated’ only because young players will naturally play the Italian Game in an unsophisticated way. As we now know, there are plenty of ways of playing the Italian Game which are anything but unsophisticated.

This book examines the Italian Game and the Bishop’s Opening and

aims to provide a repertoire for White in the Open Games. The backbone of the repertoire is based on what is now considered to be the main line of the Italian Game:

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♞c6 3 ♙c4 ♚c5 4 c3 ♞f6 and now **5 d3** (rather than 5 d4, which releases the tension and usually leads to more simplified positions).



This wasn’t always the case though. Only 30 years ago (not a long time when you consider the long history of

this opening) the view on 5 d3 was generally quite dismissive. For example, in *Understanding the Open Games*, a book I grew up with and greatly admired, this is what American grandmaster Edmar Mednis wrote:

“[5 d4 is] the only logical follow-up to 4 c3. Of course, the solid 5 d3 is playable, but what then is the point of White’s fourth move.

“Often there is more than one good plan in a given opening position. Yet once a particular plan has been chosen, one must be consistent in executing it. Skipping to and fro between various courses will only lead to indigestion!”

I remember being surprised by 5 d3 when playing a fellow junior Nick Thomas (he was obviously ahead of his time in comparison to other juniors!). I had only ever faced 5 d4 previously, and like Mednis I was left wondering about the logic of such a follow-up. More to the point, I also remember I wasn’t able to find an easy solution for Black.

Even though 5 d3 is an old move, it was only during the 1980s that grandmasters really began to appreciate that the ‘quiet Italian’ was a viable option for White, one which could easily be compared to various d3 lines in the Ruy Lopez. Practitioners during this period included players such as John Nunn, Lev Psakhis, Sergey Dolmatov and Sergey Kudrin, while even Anatoly Karpov played it very occasionally, most notably in his 1981 world championship

match against Viktor Korchnoi.

In the 1990s there were some new discoveries, adding an extra string to White’s bow. A group of players demonstrated that White could play the Italian Game more aggressively. Delaying kingside castling provided more options, including launching a sustained attack against the black king using a combination of pieces and pawns. In this book I’ve decided to cover both approaches (the Classical Main Line and the Modern Variation) to give the reader a choice, depending on his style and mood. In any case, even if you wish to add just one line to your repertoire, some knowledge of the other is useful in order to recognize and appreciate overlapping plans and tactical ideas, as well as the numerous transpositional possibilities.

Can you count on a theoretical advantage using the Italian Game? I don’t think you can. I could say “Where can you? Good luck trying to prove an edge against the Marshall Gambit!”, but I better stop myself at this point. Basically, there are many lines in the Italian Game which do lead to an advantage for White, but there are also many which ‘only’ lead to interesting positions, with level chances. I don’t think this matters. After all, when all is said and done, it’s worth remembering that understanding the position better than your opponent is much more important than any theoretical edge the position may offer. In this book my aim is

to help you to really understand the Italian Game and Bishop's Opening.

In recent years there have been a number of players whose creative efforts over the board have enriched the theory and ideas of the Italian Game. They have made the task of studying, playing and writing about the Italian Game a lot easier than it might have been, and for this they deserve a huge amount of credit and gratitude. The list of Italian Game heroes includes players such as Sergei Tiviakov, Viktor Bologan, Sergei Movsesian, Alexander Areshchenko, Zahar Efimenko, Michael Adams, Boris Gelfand, Evgeny Alekseev and Vladimir Kramnik. I could on, but however long the list was, it would always miss out someone who deserved to be there. Throughout this book there are many games and game snippets involving these players, but you don't need to stop there. You could do much worse than check out players such as Tiviakov and Bologan on an online database, and play through all of their games in the Italian Game, as I'm sure this would help you to get a good feel for the opening.

As for my own experiences in this opening, I returned to the Italian Game in 2000 so that I would have another weapon to go with the Ruy Lopez. Since then I have avidly studied and played the Italian Game – fortunately with good results. I'm finding that even now I'm learning new things. For example, just a few days ago I played a game and

my opponent surprised me with a completely new idea. Having said that, after 10 years of studying the opening it's probably getting to the stage where I'm learning fewer things, so this seems like a good time to share my thoughts.

Arriving via the Bishop's Opening

While considering a 1 e4 e5 repertoire for White for this book, one decision I had to make was how to reach the Italian Game. I didn't have much hesitation about choosing a route via the Bishop's Opening. Using the move order 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c3 3 ♙c4 would require coverage of the Petroff Defence, which I decided against for two reasons. Firstly, the Petroff leads to completely different positions to those in the Italian Game, whereas the Bishop's Opening and Italian Game are closely linked as White uses very similar development patterns. Combining the Italian Game and the Bishop's Opening provides a 'system' type of repertoire, and this seemed like a logical step to take. The second problem is a practical one. The Petroff is a unique opening, in that the theory it has generated vastly outweighs its popularity at anything under 2600 level – it's almost inversely proportional to it. I wasn't attracted by the idea of a considerable percentage of the book being taken up by an opening which readers would face only occasionally.

By including the Bishop's Opening, I hope that the repertoire options will be

useful in more than one way. Firstly, and most obviously, there's the option of always choosing the Bishop's Opening move order in your games. Secondly, those of you who are always prepared to face the Petroff might wish to use only the Italian Game part of the repertoire. Finally, some players like to keep their opponents guessing by using a combination of 2 ♘f3 and 2 ♙c4, choosing one or the other for specific occasions, depending on factors such as the opponent's repertoire.

Chapters at a Glance

Throughout the book I've generally presented the material using the traditional move orders. For example, I refer to the Italian Game as 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♙c4, rather than 1 e4 e5 2 ♙c4 ♘c6 3 ♘f3. I've sometimes tweaked move orders within games, normally in order to cover early alternatives in a convenient way.

Before plunging in, I think it's worth laying down a brief summary of the chapters, on this occasion using the Bishop's Opening move order:

1 e4 e5 2 ♙c4

2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♙c4 is the Italian Game (Chapters 1-5).

If Black answers 2 ♘f3 with 2...d6, White can play 3 ♙c4, which is covered

in Chapter 6 (Game 46).

White cannot play an Italian Game set-up with ♙c4 and d3 if Black chooses 2...♘f6, 2...d5 or 2...f5 – basically moves which attack the e4-pawn.

2...♘f6

If 2...♘c6, White replies 3 ♘f3 with a direct transposition to the Italian Game (Chapters 1-5). Second move alternatives are considered in Chapter 6.

3 d3

Now:

a) 3...♘c6 (the most common choice) 4 ♘f3 transposes to the Italian Game: 4...♙c5 5 c3 is covered in Chapters 1-3, while other moves (4...♙e7, 4...h6, 4...d5 etc) belong in Chapter 4.

b) 3...c6 is the main alternative for Black (see Chapter 6).

c) Other moves, like 3...♙c5 and 3...♙e7, are also covered in Chapter 6.

Now, without further ado, it's time to plunge in! It just remains for me to wish you every success with the Italian Game and Bishop's Opening.

PS Please look out in the future for free updates on this book at www.everymanchess.com.

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