

Opening Hacker Files

THE CARLSEN VARIATION

A new Anti-Sicilian
to rattle your opponents



CARSTEN HANSEN

FOREWORD BY GRANDMASTER SIMON WILLIAMS

Foreword by Grandmaster Simon Williams

Carsten Hansen has established himself as a world-leading expert on opening theory and exciting and new concepts that occur in the early stages of the game, and his new and exciting book *'The Carlsen Variation'* is no exception. Ram-packed with original ideas, this opening will give you access to a new variation that you can use against the Sicilian, lines that come with the 'Magnus Carlsen seal of approval.'

I have long been a fan of Carsten's extensive and tireless work on openings; in the past, several of Carsten's books have helped me better understand and develop my own opening repertoire. We share a mutual affection for the English Opening, and my own library holds countless, well-thumbed volumes by Carsten in this and other opening repertoires.

I must also praise Carsten for his self-publication work. Bringing out your own books can often be a stressful event, sometimes leading to below-par products. This is certainly not the case with any of Carsten's publication; every self-published work from Carsten is of an exceedingly high standard. If anything, self-publishing has allowed Carsten to share his special creative ideas with the chess community.

In *'The Carlsen Variation,'* the opening moves 1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 d6 3.d4!? already take the game into new and uncharted areas, full of potential. The 'Carlsen Variation' is the ideal tool to shock your opponent, cautiously and optimistically, without taking too many undue risks for White. The opening comprehensively covered in this book is one of the most recent opening discoveries in modern theory; by using such a set-up, you are certain to confound your opponent! It is very rare nowadays to discover new opening concepts, making such openings that much more exciting. Why copy every other chess player when you can bring something unique, exciting, and cutting edge to the board!

One of the reasons that I have fallen into love with chess is because of the new and exciting ideas that even a seasoned professional can find over the sixty-four squares. Rather than merely copying all the main standard ideas, I have found beauty in bringing rarer and more untapped concepts to life. The 'Carlsen Variation' does just that. It shows how the opening can still be a rich tapestry in the modern era; new ideas are there to be found and there to be played.

Name-sake Magnus has been one of the main practitioners of the Carlsen Variation, making its use popular as of only a couple of years ago, which we see in the introductory game where Magnus uses it to destroy Grandmaster Radoslaw Wojtaszek. This is really a model game for the variation; Black seems to do very little wrong, yet White gains a decisive attack with very little risk or compromise. The set-up that you will learn in this book has also been given the seal of approval by a number of other strong and imaginative Grandmasters; Carsten goes on to name some of these players after the introductory game.

The key concept that I really like about this variation is how it is based on very sound positional ideas. Yet, it contains a number of remarkably poisonous intentions, my favorite being the deployment of White's Bishop to b2, which is extremely rare in the Sicilian yet very effective! Such an idea will surely shock and surprise your opponent, leaving them with much to think about from a very early stage of the game.

On a personal note, I will certainly be utilizing this opening in my chess adventures, and I know that you, the reader, will also reap the benefits from the many discoveries and developments that Carsten brings to life in this pioneering book.

Simon Williams

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Introduction

First of all, what is the Carlsen Variation? Well, to be honest, I'm not even sure that this is the correct name, but since it was World Champion Magnus Carlsen, who first played the opening at top level, it makes perfect sense that it is named after him. Additionally, I have seen that name applied on the excellent chesspublishing.com website, so I decided to go along with it.

The first time I saw this variation, I have to admit I was a bit skeptical. What on earth was the World Champion doing? Was this one his nutty ideas spawned by too many online blitz games, or was he actually serious? What is the exact thinking behind this line? What are the typical ideas for both sides?

Before continuing, let us take a look at that inaugural game (at least in top-flight chess):

**Magnus Carlsen (2843) –
Radoslaw Wojtaszek (2744)**
Gashimov Memorial (Shamkir) 2018

1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 d6 3.d4!?

The first surprise, but possibly only a small one as White can still transpose to several other lines.

3...cxd4 4.Qxd4 Nc6

Here, Black undoubtedly expected 5.Bb5 with a likely transposition to a well-known anti-Sicilian after 5.Bb5 Bd7 6.Bxc6 Bxc6 7.Nf3 Nf6, which has been played in more than 7000 games in my database.

5.Qd2!



The exclamation point is solely given for the surprise value. The objective value is no better than the above-mentioned line with 5.Bb5.

Before this game, this move had only been played in a few inconsequential games between lower-rated players. But this game started a trend that has only been gathering steam. If you are analyzing the variation with an engine with the typical assessment will frequently be equal play, but in praxis, matters are far from that clear.

Typically, Black will be forced to think for him- or herself right from the get-go. Additionally, Black's task to find a feasible set-up is far from easy. Standard plans may initially be acceptable, but what then? White's moves are far easier to find and play than Black's moves. Also, what are the consequences of White having a bishop on b2 rather than the traditional development? The bishop is ominously pointing straight at Black's kingside, and the pawn on b3 prevents many of Black's typical counterplay ideas. In other words, unless Black has specifically studied this line, he, or she, will be hard challenged to find a good line, whereas White, being on home turf, will be rather comfortable. With this in mind, it is easy to see what attracted the World Champion to use this line against the theoretically, very well-armed Polish super grandmaster.

5...Nf6

The Polish Grandmaster usually plays the Najdorf Variation and therefore is not keen on heading for the nowadays more popular line starting with 5...g6. Again, it is important to understand that Black in this game had no reference point, no prior experience with this line, and had to make up his mind about each position for the first time, no a fun situation to find yourself in when playing the World Champion.

6.b3

This is White's idea, developing the bishop to b2 and then castling queenside.

6...e6 7.Bb2 a6 8.0-0-0 b5 9.f3



Thus far, nothing out of the ordinary has happened: White has completed his queenside development and is now ready to start pushing the kingside pawns forward. Black has chosen a typical Najdorf/Scheveningen set-up but now has to start figuring out what to do next.

9...h5?!

In the English Attack against the Najdorf/Scheveningen, Black often resorts to this move to restrain White on the kingside, making the pawn advances more challenging to accomplish. However, here it creates some weaknesses that White normally will have a hard time addressing, but here, with the knight still on g1 instead of on d4, White can play the knight to g5 and even 10.Qg5!/? can be considered.

10.Nh3!/? Be7

In a later game, Black tried 10...Bb7 when White after 11.Ng5 Rc8 12.Kb1 Be7 13.f4 Qa5 14.Be2 0–0 15.Bf3 Rc7 16.Rhe1 had a comfortable advantage in the game Kraus-Kozak, Radenci 2019.

11.Ng5 h4

Black wants to prevent White from playing h2–h4, anchoring the knight on g5, but as we saw in the game with 10...Bb7, White does not necessarily need to play that pawn advance, perfectly happy to play f3–f4 instead. Therefore, it is unclear what Black gets in return for his investment in time.

12.f4 Bb7 13.Kb1

The normal square for the king, keeping him away from potential shenanigans on the h6–c1 diagonal.

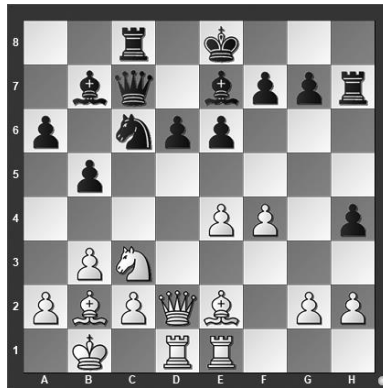
13...Rc8 14.Be2 Qc7 15.Rhe1

Model play but also 15.Rhf1 could have been considered.

15...Nh7?

This is definitely wrong, but matters are beginning to be quite uncomfortable for Black. With the pawn on h4, the castling kingside seems like a step in the wrong direction, for instance, 15...0–0 16.Bd3 (or 16.Bf3) 16...Nb4 17.Qf2 (also 17.Nxb5 axb5 18.Qxb4 d5 19.Qd2 is better for White) 17...Nd7 18.Qxh4 Bxg5 19.Qxg5 and White has won a pawn for inadequate compensation.

16.Nxh7 Rxh7



17.g4?!

Another normal move, but White had an interesting alternative in 17.Nd5!, severely challenging Black's future, for instance, 17...exd5 18.exd5 Nd8 (the computer prefers to hand the piece back immediately with 18...Kf8 when 19.dxc6 Bxc6 20.Bg4 Re8 21.Qc3 leaves White with an overwhelming positional advantage; all of White's pieces are on their ideal squares while Black is struggling with his poorly coordinated pieces) 19.Bg4 Kf8 20.Re2! (intending Rde1; alternatively, 20.Qd3!/? Kg8 21.Bf5 Rh5 22.Bxc8 Rxd5 23.Qxd5 Bxd5 24.Rxd5 Qxc8 25.Rxe7 with an overwhelming advantage for White) 20...Kg8 21.Bxc8 Bxc8 22.Qc3! (exchanging Black's key defender) 22...Qxc3 23.Bxc3 and White is completely winning as Black loses a piece.

17...hxg3 18.hxg3 Bf6 19.Bd3 Rh8



20.g4?!

White grabs space on the kingside but 20.Rh1! appears better, for example, 20...Rxf1 21.Rxf1 Bd4 (if 21...Ke7, then 22.e5! Nxe5 23.fxe5 Bxf1 24.exf6+ gxf6 25.Qh6 and White is clearly better) 22.Rh7 (or 22.Nd5 exd5 23.exd5 Bxb2 24.dxc6 Qxc6 25.Re1+ Kf8 26.Kxb2 with a positional advantage for White) 22...Qa5 23.Be2! Ke7 24.a3 and White has clearly better chances.

If instead 27...Rc7 then 28.g5 Rh4 29.g6! (or 29.Qg3!? Qd4 30.Rh2 and White is much better) 29...Qd4 30.Qc1 Qf4 31.Qa3+ Qb4 32.Qxb4+ Rxb4 33.Rh2 and White is clearly better in the endgame.

28.Rxh1 Bxh1 29.Rh2!

Likely the move that Black had overlooked.

29...Rxe5 30.Rh8+ Ke7 31.Qa7+ Black resigned as after 31.Qa7+ Kf6 32.g5+! Rxc5 (or 32...Kxc5 33.Qe7+) 33.Rxh1, White wins easily. 1–0

As is clear from this game, it is not easy to play against this set-up by White. Of course, neither you nor I, for that matter, are as strong as Magnus Carlsen, but it is noticeable how White's game flowed naturally and quite smoothly, whereas Black was struggling for concrete ideas about what to do with his pieces.

Since this game, many other grandmasters have taken up this variation, such as Caruana, Nakamura, So, Firouzja, Andreikin, Morozevich, Sethuraman, and countless other grandmasters and international masters. But despite this relative popularity, this opening variation is still relatively unknown, and at the time of writing, it has been played fewer than 300 times in my database.

In this book, I have taken all the material that is available to me, structured it, and made it more digestible. At the same, I have added a lot of new ideas, fresh analysis as well as some repertoire recommendations.

I will not guarantee you any opening advantage, but I will promise you a lot of exciting games, where you, with this book in your hands, will know more about the arising positions than your opponents.

Personally, I have played the variation several times in online games at various time controls. In nearly all cases, my opponents have used a lot of their allotted time in the opening, only to see themselves struggle through the middlegame.

Have fun with the Carlsen Variation, and play some exciting games! Also, if you play some interesting games with this variation, e-mail them to me, and the same goes for if you have found holes in my analysis or some improvements of your own. I may then include them in a future update of this book. My email address is carstenches@gmail.com.

Chapter 1:

Minor 5th Moves

1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Qxd4 Nc6 5.Qd2 a6

Additionally, Black has some additional minor 5th move options. Still, they too tend to transpose, as we will see below, (and therefore other chapters) but there are a few independent ideas to look at:

- a) 5...e5 (this move has been the preference of Armenian Grandmaster Gabuzyan)



a1) A different choice and not our game plan was tested in Shabalov-Gabuzyan, Greensboro 2018: 6.Bc4!? Be6 7.Bb3 Nf6 8.Nge2 (8.Nf3 Be7 9.0-0 0-0 10.Rd1 h6 11.Qe2 is an alternative although hardly better for White) 8...Be7 9.0-0 0-0



10.f4?! (this is a bad idea; White should have given preference to 10.Rd1 when 10...Rc8 11.Ng3 a6 12.Qd3 Qc7, the chances are more or less even) 10...b5!?

11.Qd3 Rc8?! (Black misses an opportunity to take command of the game with 11...Nb4! 12.Qxb5?! (and 12.Qd1 a6 and Black has solved his opening problems) 12...Rb8 13.Qa4 d5 14.fxe5 Bc5+ and White is clearly in trouble) 12.Qxb5 Nd4?! (if 12...a6!? then 13.Qd3!? (but not 13.Qxa6 when 13...Bxb3 14.axb3 Nb4 15.Qa5 Nxc2 and Black is fine) 13...Nb4 14.Qf3 Qc7) 13.Qd3! Nxb3 14.axb3 d5 and now 15.exd5 Nxd5 16.fxe5 Bc5+ 17.Kh1 Ne3 18.Bxe3 Qxd3 19.cxd3 Bxe3 20.d4 and White has the better chances.

a2) 6.b3 Nf6 7.Bb2 Be7 8.0-0 0-0 9.f3!? (9.Kb1 is discussed in the note to Black's 8th move in chapter 2) 9...a5 (9...a6 10.Kb1 b5 is another transposition to chapter 2) 10.Kb1 Be6 11.g4 Ne8 12.h4 Bxh4? 13.Qh2 g5 14.f4! and White is winning.

- b) 5...e6 6.b3 Nf6 (6...a6 transposes to our main line) 7.Bb2 and now Black's 7...d5, 7...Be7, 7...a6 transpose to subsequent chapters.

6.b3 Nf6 7.Bb2 e6

7...b5 is covered in chapter 3.

8.0-0-0 Qa5

8...b5 9.f3 transposes to chapter 3 as well.

9.f3 Be7 10.Kb1 b5

Black intends to stay away from castling as long as possible.

11.g4 Bb7 12.h4 Rc8

Or 12...Rd8 13.g5 Nh5 14.Qf2 0-0 15.Nge2 and White has a good game.

13.g5 Nd7 14.Nge2



The immediate 14.a3 should also be discussed because White doesn't need to allow Black the option discussed in next note; White can always follow up with Nge2 on the next move or later when it is convenient

14...0-0

The alternatives are:

- a) Tempting but ultimately not very good is 14...b4? 15.Nd5! (Yes, even in this line, White can use sacrifices like this; the safer alternative is 15.Na4 when things rapidly turn messy, for instance, 15...Nce5 16.Nd4 Nxf3 17.Nxf3 Bxe4 18.Qe2 Bxc2+ 19.Ka1 Bxd1 20.Qxd1 where Black has a rook and three pawns for two minor pieces, yet White's chances seem preferable because it is easier to generate threats and Black's minor pieces are difficult to activate) 15...exd5 16.exd5 Na7 17.a3 Qc7 18.axb4 0-0 19.c4 and while White only has two pawns for the piece, Black's position is rather depressing because getting his piece into play presently constitute a massive problem.
- b) 14...Nb4? 15.Nd4 (15.a3 Nc6 16.Bg2 is clearly better for White) 15...0-0 16.a3 Nc6 17.Nxc6 Rxc6 18.Nd5 Qd8 19.Qd4 f6 20.Nf4 and White clearly better, Pirola-Carvalho, Teresina 2019.

15.a3!?

This pawn advance looks inaccurate because it allows Black's next move, but when Black's queen is on a5, it is less of a concern.

15...b4

Also 15...Rfd8 16.Bg2 (or 16.h5 b4 17.axb4 Nxb4 18.g6 fxg6 19.hxg6 hxg6 20.Bh3 Nf8 with a sharp position where I prefer White, but Black certainly has a solid share of the chances) 16...b4 17.Nd5! exd5 18.exd5 Nce5 19.f4 Ng4 20.axb4 Qc7 21.c4! a5 (21...Nf2? 22.Qd4 wins for White) 22.Bf3 h5 23.Bxg4 hxg4 24.h5 and Black will have a hard time stopping White's kingside attack.

16.Na2 bxa3 17.Qxa5 Nxa5 18.Bxa3 and White has somewhat better chances.