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2 Modern Variation

The Modern Variation is characterized by White playing the moves e4, h3, ♘f3 and ♕d3. The move h3 prevents Black from pinning with ...♗g4, and the bishop on d3 securely defends the e4-pawn, so it is not so easy for Black to disrupt this set-up by normal means. The move h3 is obviously a little slow, and initially it was presumed that the standard tactical blow ...b5 would solve Black's problems. However, once White realized that this thematic sacrifice was not a refutation, and that it didn't promise easy equality either, the line became fashionable.

With his f3-knight 'secured' White doesn't want to play ♘d2-c4, and plans ♗f4, ♖e1, etc., seeking the break e5. The usefulness of h3, in addition to ruling out ...♗g4 and ...♘g4, is that it allows the retreat ♗h2 in the event of the f4-bishop being attacked.

Game 5 analyses the standard 'Modern' position resulting from 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e6 4 ♘c3 exd5 5 cxd5 d6 6 e4 (or 6 ♘f3 g6 7 h3 ♗g7 8 e4, which is a common alternative move-order) 6...g6 7 ♘f3 ♗g7 8 h3 0-0 9 ♕d3. Black plays solidly and proves that it is not easy to break his position.

In the next two games we examine Black's ways to avoid the standard position. As mentioned above, White has several main routes to reach the 'Modern' set-up, and in some cases Black has a way to frustrate his intentions. **Game 6** features 6 ♘f3 g6 7 h3 intending 8 e4, and Black replies 7...a6 8 a4 ♖e7, preventing e4. This leads to positions of a very different character, in which White cannot expand so rapidly, but can also argue that the black queen is misplaced.

The move-order 6 e4 g6 7 ♘f3 appears in **Game 7**, which Black meets with 7...a6, intending after 8 a4 to play 8...♗g4, reaching a type of position akin to Game 1, which White is seeking to avoid. After 8 h3 b5, as played in the game, Black speeds up his advance on the queenside, while White seeks to show that his central preponderance is of greater weight and that Black's queenside advance does not sweep away all in its path – indeed in the main game we see White playing on the queenside himself.

Game 5 [A70]

Alexander Onishchuk – Hikaru Nakamura

USA Ch, San Diego 2006

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e6 4 ♘c3 exd5 5 cxd5 d6
6 e4 g6 7 h3 ♗g7 8 ♘f3 0-0 9 ♕d3 a6

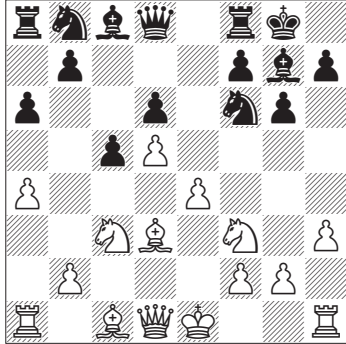
"Every time they don't play 9...b5 I get happy" said Atalik about this position. 9...b5 is the thematic move, but if White so wishes, he can reach an endgame by force with an extra pawn, which according to the latest examples, and Grivas's recent book *Beating the Fianchetto Defences*, is unpleasant for Black to defend. We

shall not be examining it here, since the assessments depend critically on detailed analysis, and less so on general assessments and themes.

Another important idea is the provocative 9...♘h5, preventing ♗f4 by White, profusely analysed in Watson's book *The Gambit Guide to the Modern Benoni*. 9...♖e8 10 0-0 c4, as well as the less popular continuations 9...♕d7, and 9...♘a6 are employed too.

10 a4 (D)

B



Once his expansion with ...b5 is stopped, Black accepts that he will have a slightly passive game to start with and hopes to develop all his forces, awaiting further developments by White, trusting the solidity of his position and keeping in reserve the possibility of breaking with ...b5, as well as ...f5.

10...♖bd7 11 0-0 ♜e8

It is still possible to enter the line recommended by Watson, by playing 11...♗h5.

12 ♜e1

The most important alternative is 12 ♕f4, which can transpose to our main line after 12...♝c7 (if White replies 13 ♜e1). There is an independent line, namely the thematic move 13 ♗d2. The knight is heading for c4, besides clearing the way for the f2-pawn. Beliavsky-Petkevich, Warsaw 2004 continued 13...♗h5 (to combat White's intention of 14 ♗c4, which would force 14...♕f8; the alternative for Black is 13...♗e5) 14 ♕h2 ♕d4 15 ♖h1 ♗g7 (Black tries to stop White's expansion on the kingside with a timely ...f5) 16 ♝c2 (after 16 a5 b5 17 axb6 ♗xb6, Black has gained useful space on the queenside; the natural 16 ♗c4 is interesting: after 16...♗e5 17 ♕xe5 ♕xe5 18 f4 ♕d4, White can play 19 f5!? in good circumstances; if 19 ♝f3, there would follow one of the ideas of the black manoeuvre, 19...f5) 16...♗e5 17 ♕e2 f5 18 f4 ♗f7 19 ♕f3 fxg4 (in order to obtain the f5-square; if 19...♕d7, there could follow 20 g4!?) 20 ♗cxe4 ♗f5 21 ♜ae1 ♕d7. Black's position is satisfactory: the d4-bishop controls the dark squares and covers the weaknesses of the castled position.

12...♝c7

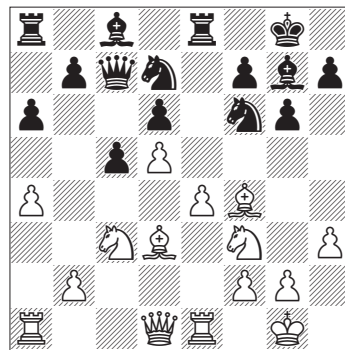
Black can also play 12...♝c7, one of whose ideas is a frequent one in other lines of the Benoni: to make way for the other pieces by 'hiding' the queen on f8. There would also follow 13 ♕f4!, as always with the idea of breaking with e5. 13...♗h5 14 ♕h2 ♝f8 (if 14...♗e5, there follows 15 ♕e2!, which is the usual answer in the line 9...♗h5), and now:

a) 15 g4 ♗hf6 16 e5 dxe5 17 ♗xe5 ♗xe5 18 ♕xe5 is hasty due to 18...♜xe5! 19 ♜xe5 ♗xg4, with good compensation for the exchange in the form of a pawn and dark-square control, Estremera-A.Hoffman, Mancha Real 2000.

b) 15 a5! puts Black's position under pressure, as Atalik has demonstrated. There follows 15...♗e5 16 ♕e2! ♗f6 (this retreat shows that something has gone wrong; Atalik indicates that after 16...♗xf3+ 17 ♕xf3 ♗f6 there would follow 18 e5! and if, for instance, 18...dxe5 19 ♕xe5 ♗d7 20 ♕xg7 ♖xg7 21 ♗a4, Black is behind in development and lacks coordination, and he also has a serious weakness on c5) 17 ♗xe5 dxe5 (as almost always this structure is bad for Black) 18 ♝c2 ♕d7 19 ♜a3 (making the most of the move 15 a5) 19...♝d6 20 ♜b3 ♝c7 21 ♜b6, Atalik-Lafuente, Mar del Plata 2003.

13 ♕f4 (D)

B



13...b6

Black continues his development. The b7-bishop occupies a passive position, putting pressure on d5 and little more, but it allows the a8-rook to enter the game. Black hopes he will be able to activate his bishop later on.

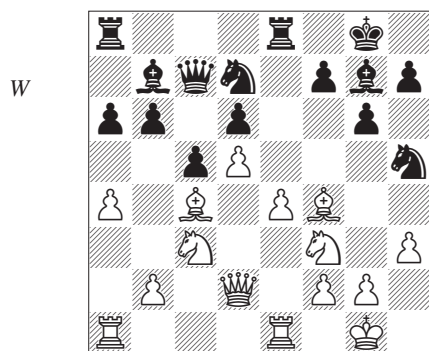
Preparing ...b5 with 13...♜b8 hasn't achieved good results. Karpov-Timman, Candidates (6),

Kuala Lumpur 1990 continued 14 ♖c4! (supporting d5, in order to keep preparing e5, as well as stopping an eventual ...c4 by Black) 14...♟b6 (this move drives away the c4-bishop, but leaves the knight in a bad situation; after 14...♟h5 15 ♖h2 ♟e5, there follows the already familiar 16 ♖e2!, and in the event of 16...♟xf3+ 17 ♖xf3 ♟f6, White has everything ready for 18 e5! dxe5 19 d6, followed by 20 ♖xe5, with advantage, thanks to the strong passed pawn and very active pieces) 15 ♖f1 ♟fd7 16 a5 ♟a8 17 ♟d2 b5 (an interesting pawn sacrifice to seek counterplay, and preventing ♟c4; if 17...♟e5, there would follow 18 ♖g3, threatening f4 and ♟c4) 18 axb6 ♟axb6 19 ♖xa6 ♖xa6 20 ♖xa6 ♟e5 21 ♖e2 c4 22 ♖xe5 ♖xe5 23 ♖e3 ♖b7 24 ♟a4! ♟xa4 25 ♖xa4, and White ended up with a very solid structure, and eventually converted his extra pawn into victory.

14 ♖d2 ♖b7 15 ♖c4

As Karpov points out, the natural 15 ♖ad1 allows 15...c4!, surrendering d4 in exchange for being able to play ...♟c5. The fact that the b7-bishop controls c6 is one of the positive things about the waiting policy. Polak-Akintola, Elista Olympiad 1998 continued 16 ♖c2 ♖ad8 17 ♟d4 ♟c5 18 ♖g5 ♖c8 19 ♖f4 ♟fd7 20 ♖h6, and here Marin's suggestion 20...♖h8! is interesting, leaving e5 for the d7-knight, with a reasonable position.

15...♟h5 (D)



16 ♖h2

Maintaining the annoying pressure on d6. The exchange of the dark-squared bishops is always something to consider. It is worth asking

oneself who gets to control the squares that are left unprotected after 16 ♖h6. In Gundrum-Raimer, ICCF email 2000, Black had no problems after 16...♖xh6 17 ♖xh6 ♟hf6 18 ♟d2 ♖e7 19 ♖e2?!, but White could have been more ambitious by playing 19 f4! ♖ae8 20 ♖h4, and the break e5 is hanging over this position. There is no clear continuation to be seen for Black. 16...♖h8! is therefore preferable, in keeping with the waiting policy adopted by Black.

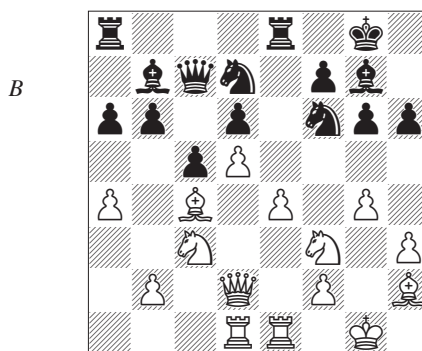
16...h6

Preventing the e5 break with 16...♟e5, even though the dark-squared bishops are exchanged – and therefore without a ‘tall pawn’ remaining on g7 – is not entirely satisfactory. It should be used only as a last resort. In Kazhgaleev-Glitsensteyn, Issy-les-Moulineaux 2004, the continuation was 17 ♖xe5 ♖xe5 18 ♟xe5 dxe5 19 ♖ac1 ♖d6 20 ♖f1 ♖c8 21 ♟b1 ♖d7 22 b3 b5 23 ♖e3 ♖ec8 24 axb5 axb5 25 ♖c2 ♖a1 26 ♟c3 ♖xe1 27 ♖xe1, and Black's queenside pawns became weak, whereas the same cannot be said of the d5-pawn.

17 g4!?

There was no need to compromise the structure; for instance, 17 ♖ad1 could have been played. Of course winning space is not bad, taking into account the passivity of Black's position. However, it does require more attention to tactical details in the future, because the white king's position becomes somewhat ‘airy’.

17...♟hf6 18 ♖ad1 (D)



18...h5

This is the negative side of 17 g4: Black gets some counterplay against White's king, but this is not a serious annoyance as yet.

19 g5 ♖h7 20 ♙g3 ♜e7

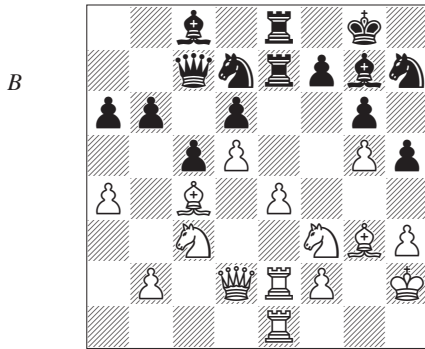
Finding a destination for the a8-rook, namely, to put pressure on the a4-pawn. The drawback is that the a6-pawn becomes weaker.

21 ♜e2 ♜ae8 22 ♜de1 ♙c8

Now White made an error in calculation:

23 ♙h2? (D)

The drawback of Black's plan – which is the already-mentioned a6-pawn – could have been highlighted with 23 ♙d3, as pointed out by Onishchuk himself. Black would then have to give up a pawn, although it is not clear what the best way may be.



23...b5!

All the black pieces wake up, above all the queen, and the weakness of the white king becomes apparent.

24 e5?!

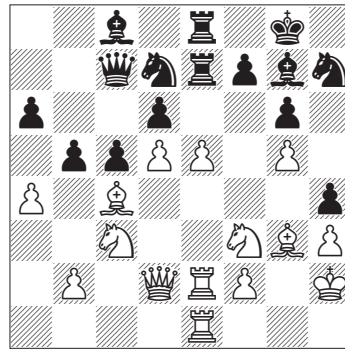
This move might appear strong, but after Black's powerful reply, White will find himself on the brink of defeat.

Onishchuk indicated 24 axb5 as better, although the position is still very complex. For instance, after his main line, 24...♖b6 25 ♙d3 ♙d7 26 ♖g1 c4 27 ♙c2 axb5 28 ♙e3!, there can follow 28...h4!, with the idea of meeting 29 ♙xh4 (if 29 ♙f4 there is time for 29...♙d8, and if 30 ♖xb5?, the difference from the direct 28...♙d8 is that with 30...♖xd5 the f4-bishop is also hit, so Black wins), since d6 isn't attacked, with the regrouping 29...♙b7, followed by 30...♖d7.

24...h4! (D)

This battering-ram near the white king is very strong. The two pieces that can capture it are overloaded.

W



25 ♙f4

If 25 ♙xh4, since d6 is no longer under the bishop's influence, then 25...bxc4 26 exd6 ♙b8, whereas against 25 ♖xh4 the move 25...♖xe5! is quite strong – White must give up material.

25...♖xe5

The coordination of the black pieces has been re-established, and the white king is exposed.

26 ♙xe5 ♙d7

Onishchuk points out that 26...dxe5 would also work, not fearing 27 d6 due to 27...♙d7, and the white king is in even more danger than in the game.

27 ♙xg7 ♙xh3+ 28 ♙g1 ♙g4+ 29 ♙h2 ♙h3+

The position is very complex, and White is struggling to hold the balance. Onishchuk analyses the complications ensuing from 29...♙xf3!? in *Informator 96*.

30 ♙g1 ♙g4

Black is better and hopes to exploit the white king's lack of defence.

31 ♖h2 ♙xe2 32 ♙xe2

After 32 ♙f6? there follows 32...♙f3! 33 ♖xf3 ♙g4+ 34 ♙h2 ♜xe1 35 ♖xe1 bxc4, winning.

32...♙xg7 33 axb5 ♜e5 34 f4

A necessary weakening, and a good move too. If 34 ♖f3?, besides 34...♜f5 pointed out by Onishchuk, there is also 34...♜xe2; for example, 35 ♖xe2 ♙xf3 36 bxa6 ♜e5, with a mating attack.

34...♜e3 35 ♙h1 axb5 36 ♖xb5 ♜g3 37 ♙f1 ♜xe1 38 ♙xe1 ♙f5 (D)

39 ♙d2!

The d5- and f4-pawns are both needed to hold the position. If 39 ♖c7?, there follows