The Scheveningen Sicilian Revisited

Daniel Gormally

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Author: Daniel Gormally
Managing Editor: Daniël Vanheirzeele
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Key to symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
=	equality
∞	unclear position
⩲	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
⇄	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⩱	better is
N	novelty
+	check
#	mate

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Introduction

Chess has changed a lot since the early part of the twentieth century, when the Scheveningen opening was first created. Gone are the dusty town and school hall venues where chess tournaments were typically played, (usually for very little money if at all) replaced by flashy online events where a small collection of players are paid handsomely. Who would have envisaged in those more innocent times that chess would often be dominated by those figures who are best equipped to use social media to promote themselves? No-one, because thankfully social media didn't even exist then. And if chess has changed, then it hasn't always been for the better. Already many players are moving into variants like 'goat' chess, 'clown' chess or whatever name they carry now, as they are driven away from classical chess. Powerful neural chess networks are seen to have turned the original form of the game into a memory contest, hardly better than a more advanced form of noughts and crosses.

For all the talk of the influence of A. I. on human society (and chess players and board games in general have been at the forefront of the discussion for some time) little has been mentioned about how lazy it can make us. Why bother to take hours constructing a beautiful picture, if you can press a button and it create it for you can instantly? Why bother to write an essay, when Chat GPT can do an even better job than you can? The same issue exists in chess, and although for the sake of this book I have lent heavily on the computer, I have also taken the time to try and explain the logic behind these moves. As I explain in the chapter "The Chess Detective", it is not enough to know what the computer is suggesting, if you don't understand these moves or positions from a human perspective. In the sections on puzzles and evaluations I encourage the reader to get used to calculating, thinking concretely and evaluating, particularly EVALUATING, because it is my belief that without regular analysis of our own games or those of others, then the chess player will not improve.

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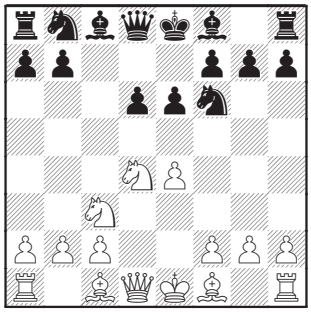
The reason why I think this book is relevant and worth purchasing, is at least in part because of the practical value of the Scheveningen. One of the advantages is that it has often been dismissed by modern theory, perhaps because the Keres attack in reply (1. e4 c5 2. ♘f3 d6 3. d4 cxd4 4. ♘xd4 ♘f6 5. ♘c3 e6 6.g4) is considered to make this a dangerous opening choice. This is a viable choice for White but hardly a refutation. Because of this often-ready dismissal, many White players aren't prepared to face the Scheveningen move order. It will also aid many Sicilian lovers, because after the moves 1. e4 c5 2. ♘f3 d6 3. d4 cxd4 4. ♘xd4 ♘f6 5. ♘c3 e6 – the Scheveningen move order – White will often respond with ♗e2 followed by castling kingside. Many other Sicilians will also transpose into the positions I discuss after these moves.

As you may have guessed this isn't your average chess book and I don't sift through each and every variation and line in the typical way of most openings' tomes, partly because I don't find such opening books particularly enjoyable to read so have no desire to inflict them on the reader either. Instead, I have gone for a more entertaining, laid-back approach and the chapters are like ten to fifteen clickbait, YouTube videos back-to-back. The games are mostly given in full, but once the important points have been dissected, only the most interesting of the remainder gets a diagram or comment. Let's see what that looks like by way of an example…

Drygalov Andrey (2510) - Nakamura Hikaru (2766)

Titled Tuesday, Chess.com 2022

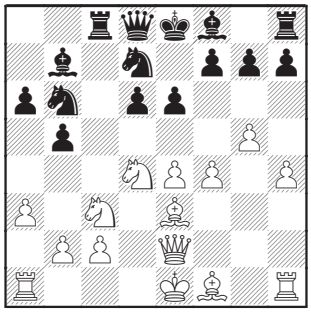
1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 d6



The starting position of the Scheveningen. White now has several ways to play, but the most common are:

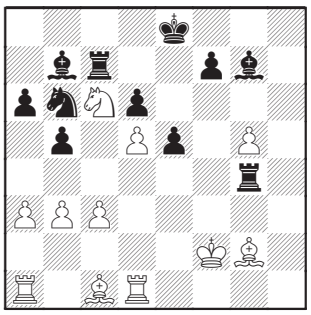
1. Attack on the kingside with g4–g5, supported sometimes with ♖g1
2. The English attack with f3, ♗e3, ♕d2
3. Classical development with ♗e2, ♗e3, leading to a position where both sides are likely to castle kingside.

6.g4 a6 7.g5 ♘fd7 8.h4 b5 9.a3 ♗b7 10.♗e3 ♘b6 11.f4 ♘8d7 12.♕e2 ♖c8!



Clearly envisaging a potential ...♖xc3 sacrifice later. Black has a flexible and counterattacking position and went onto win.

13.♗g2 ♘c4 14.♗c1 g6 15.f5 e5 16.♘b3 ♘db6 17.0–0 ♖c7 18.♕f2 gxf5 19.♕xf5 ♗g7 20.♘d5 ♘xd5 21.exd5 ♘b6 22.♖d1 ♕c8 23.♕xc8+ ♗xc8 24.c3 h6 25.♘a5 hxg5 26.hxg5 ♖h4 27.♘c6 ♗b7 28.b3 ♖g4 29.♔f2



29...♖xg2+ 30.♔xg2 ♘xd5 31.♘a5 ♘e3+ 32.♔g3 ♘xd1 33.♘xb7 ♖xb7 34.♗d2 ♘b2 35.♔f3 d5 36.♔e2 e4 37. a4 bxa4 38. bxa4 ♘c4 0–1

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Chapter 1

Tabiyas

In this chapter we will discuss tabiyas - opening positions that are the most important and most likely to occur in the Scheveningen.

Durarbayli Vasif (2638) - Nakamura Hikaru (2766)

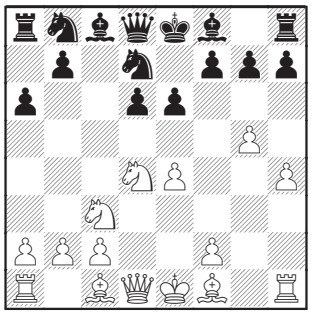
Titled Tuesday, Chess.com 2022

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 d6 6.g4 a6

Let us first look at a sideline.

6...h6 is the mainline, which we will discuss later.

7.g5 ♘fd7 8.h4



This is a typical position or tabiya that can arise from this opening system. This position is ideal for counter-attacking players such as the one holding the Black pieces in this game, the brilliant Hikaru Nakamura.

Black's intention is clear: they will play ...b5 and ...♗b7. Then they can fully mobilise the queenside by means of ...♘b6, ...♘8d7 followed by ...♖c8, or alternatively (and perhaps more soundly) ...♘c6 and exchanging on d4. Only then can they think about piling the pressure on the queenside further by means of ...♘e5–c4, or even by the exchange sacrifice ...♖xc3 (If White happens to castle queenside, and sometimes even if he doesn't.)

All this takes time however, so Black must be careful. But White's kingside

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attack also isn't as dangerous as it first seems. I downloaded ten games from this position and in about five of them White managed to create some kind of breakthrough on the kingside with the pawns and won the game. But most of these occurred much later in the game, when White had fully mobilised on the queenside, and also occurred after we had seen some sub-optimal play by Black. White also has the option of ♖h3, because if we look at the current position then h5–g6 will run into …hxg6, when the reply hxg6 will drop the rook on h1.

White also must finely judge their own chances of attack with preventing Black's own threats, for example of launching a queenside counterattack and putting some pressure on e4, with …b5 and …♗b7. White will often meet …b5 with a3 to prevent …b4, destabilising the knight and weakening the defence of e4. Black can then put further pressure on this point by playing …♘c5, however White can then meet this with f3, or ♗g2 (if they have not already done so).

8…b5 9.a3 ♗b7

Black activates the bishop, putting pressure on e4 although there is no threat to take it now.

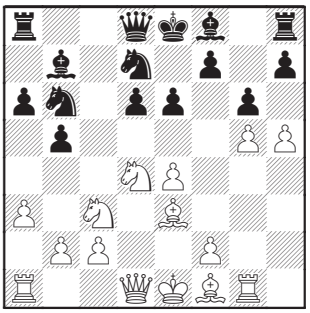
10.♖g1

this is also a typical square for the rook in this variation, because it clearly supports the h5 and g6 breakthrough idea.

10…♘b6

After 10…♘c5 11.f3 it is not clear how putting the knight on c5 has aided Black.

11.h5 g6 12.♗e3 ♘8d7±



My computer (Stockfish 12) gives a clear edge for White here and this is backed up by some of the other online engines such as Komodo. You might ask me why I am using Stockfish 12 when much more recent versions like Stockfish 16 have already been released. Well, firstly, because I'm lazy! I also feel that some of the older engines are more than strong enough for the purposes of this book, where I'm taking a laid-back approach.

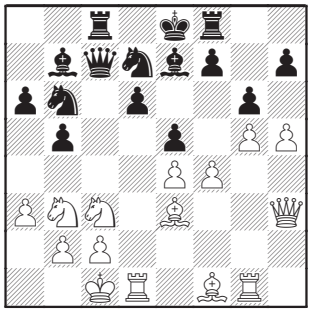
13.♕g4 ♗e7 14.♕h3

14.f4 is premature due to 14…e5! when Black has punched back in the centre in typical style. 15.♘f3 exf4 16.♗xf4 ♖c8∓

14…♖f8

Not 14…0–0? allowing 15. hxg6 hxg6 16.♖h1.

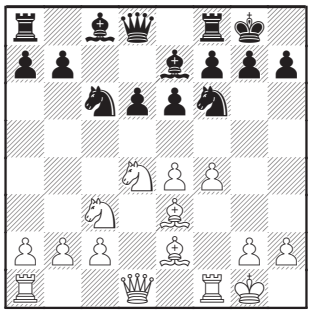
15.0–0–0 ♕c7 16.f4 e5 17.♘b3 ♖c8



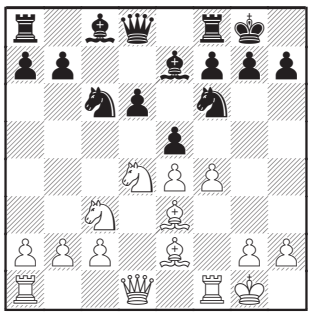
18.♖g2 ♘a4 19.♘d5 ♗xd5 20.exd5 exf4 21.♗xf4 ♘ab6 22.♖e2 ♘e5 23.♘a5 f6 24.hxg6 hxg6 25.gxf6 ♗xf6 26.♘c6 ♕d7 27.♘xe5 dxe5 28.♗xe5 ♔d8 29.♗xf6+ ♖xf6 30.♕h4 ♕d6 31.♖e6 ♕f4+ 32.♕xf4 ♖xf4 33.♖xb6 ♖f2 34.♗d3 g5 35.♖d6+ ♔e7 36.♖xa6 ♔d7 37.♖e6 ♖c5 38.♖g6 ♖g2 39.♔b1 ♖xd5 40.♗xb5+ 1–0

Svane Frederik (2618) - Kramnik Vladimir (2753)

Julius Baer Play In, Chess.com 2023



9...e5



An example of where this central pawn break was used successfully in a game. Here, Black wants to play a pawn break with …e5 for several reasons:

1. Black wants to gain an outpost on e5. If White captures on e5, then Black will take back with pawn or knight, establishing a grip on the dark squares in the centre. However, if White were to move the knight instead, Black can take on f4, also gaining access to e5 for use by their pieces.
2. As usual, Black is confirming e4 as a long-term weakness for White. Now the move e4-e5 is no longer an option for White, that pawn will likely remain on e4 for a long time, making it vulnerable in any late-middlegame/ ending. 3. Although Black has played the pawn to e6 earlier and therefore this means a loss of tempo, the above factors – combined with the fact that nothing is happening quickly in this position – means that Black can easily accept this loss of time.

↘ Chapter summary

Tabiyas are starting points for how we understand the opening. Get to a position from the Scheveningen or any other opening that is familiar to the opening, and play some training games from that position, perhaps against the computer or against a training partner. Study the position on Chessbase or some other kind of program like Chess.com or Lichess. That way you get a feel for the most familiar and most important positions in that opening variation.

But it must be said, though, that there is no substitute for practical experience. The ideal scenario is you play the Scheveningen in an over the board tournament and you analyse those games afterwards – the trial-and-error advantage of that is quite huge.

Chapter 2

The Chess Detective

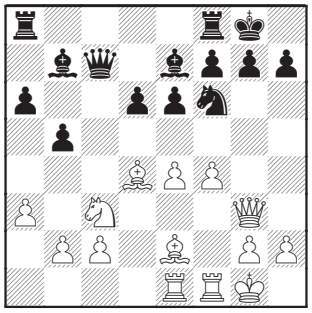
Now let's look at the opening with a detective's perspective. Issues arise when we spend too much time preparing for opponents with computers; we forget that our human opponents are likely to make all too human responses. They won't always play the zany (or ridiculously strong) responses that our engines are dreaming up. Therefore, a chess player needs to be like a master detective and approach everything with a logical basis and ask the necessary questions:

1. Why has my opponent played that move?
2. What possible plans do I have in this position?
3. If I concretely play A, how is my opponent going to respond?

Bezgodov Alexei (2452) - Andreikin Dmitry (2712)

Kurnosov Memorial Rapid, Chelyabinsk 2018

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘c6 5.♘c3 a6 6.♗e2 ♕c7 7.0–0 ♘f6 8.♗e3 ♗e7 9.f4 d6 10.♕e1 0–0 11.♕g3 ♘xd4 12.♗xd4 b5 13.a3 ♗b7 14.♖ae1



Let's think about this position. Why has White just played ♖ae1? Why not just ♗d3 and get on with it? Why bother to play the rook first? Maybe, because White wants to build up resources in a patient way before unleashing the attack. Black has to think about how to respond to White's last move. What plans do we have here?

1. We can place the bishop on c6 and play ...a5 and ...b4, deflecting the knight from c3 (which in turn will make e4 vulnerable).

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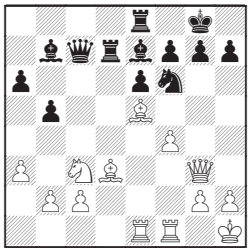
2. Developing the rooks to e8 and f8 is also a typical plan for Black. It is not just White who can centralize! One of the trademarks of the great player Anatoly Karpov was that he liked to place his rooks in the centre of the board.
3. We also have to plan our action in response to how White may attack. One pressure point that White is focusing on is g7. Black obviously cannot grab the pawn on e4, because that will allow mate in one move. So, the move … g6 also comes into consideration which would allow Black to place direct pressure on the centre in a simple way. This looks weakening but is a question of whether White can exploit that, and sometimes the "ugly" and functional moves are the best.

14…♖ad8 15.♔h1

If we are thinking with our detective mind, we might have prepared for ♔h1 before the game as we were aware it was established theory, but it also requires common sense to see that the move 15.♗d3 is possible. This is such a natural move that you would be remiss not to at least consider it. 15…♖d7 Simply strengthening. 16.♔h1 This now transposes to a well-known line. 16…♖e8 17.e5 *(17.♘d1* will be investigated in a subsequent game.*)* 17…dxe5 18.♗xe5



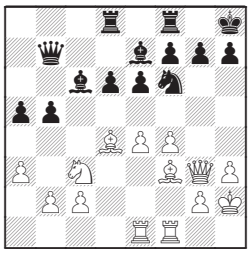
18…♕d8! this is why Black played …♖d7 earlier, because although this looks like a passive square for the queen, in fact it is very well-placed on this square. Black is now hunkered down well on the kingside, preventing tactical breakthroughs, while relying on the black queen's flexibility – later it can move to a8. 19.♘e4 ♘h5 20.♕g4 g6∓ The engine says that Black is for preference and …f5 is threatened.

15…♗c6

We know …♖d7 is fine, but this is also playable!

16.♗d3

it is interesting that White can also switch to positional play with 16.♗f3 ♕b7 Putting pressure on e4, is a logical response. 17.h3 ♔h8 18.♔h2 a5



19.♖a1 ♖g8 This is a very "engine" line