Kings of the Chessboard

Paul van der Sterren

First edition 2019 by Thinkers Publishing

All sales or enquiries should be directed to Thinkers Publishing, 9850 Landegem, Belgium.

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Cover Design: Mieke Mertens

Graphic Artist: Philippe Tonnard

Production: BESTinGraphics

ISBN: 9789492510532

D/2019/3730/6

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Introduction

People who are really, really good at something – unbelievably good, incomprehensibly good, have always held a strong fascination for those fellow humans who are less extraordinarily gifted. In this respect chess does not differ from other areas of human endeavour. To many chess lovers watching the great champions do battle with each other is even more thrilling than actually playing the game themselves.
This book is about the greatest chess players who ever lived, who dominated their era and were looked upon as World Champions even at a time when this term, this very concept, did not yet exist. On the basis of a short biography, a selection of their most famous games and a brief characteristic of their playing style I will attempt to illuminate what made these great players great and what their significance is for the chess world. This will also give an overview of how chess itself has developed over the past two and a half centuries: how it has essentially remained the same, yet changed almost beyond recognition.

Chess is an inexhaustable game. When, around 2005, it became clear that even the world's very best players could no longer keep pace with chess engines, improving at a tremendous rate, it looked as if the game might be losing its charm, at least to humans. Yet the opposite of this gloomy scenario has happened! Computer technology, with its superhuman calculating power, has added a new dimension to chess, which has given it a whole new worldwide appeal. In the past spectators at a chess tournament (a couple of hundred at best) could do little but watch and be silent. Nowadays an unlimited number of chess enthusiasts can follow tournaments from all over the world online, listen to live commentary by (human) experts and engines alike, and chat with other fans, simultaneously. It also has transformed 'visibility' of the thinking process of the top players beyond recognition. Even a World Champion can now no longer hide behind the self-evident authority of his title ("*I* played this move, *therefore* it must have been best.") – and is constantly being corrected by those all-seeing, superior computer engines.
The same engines have also helped to considerably raise the levels of their owners, for when one is in constant dialogue with a superior 'mind' one's understanding of the game will improve automatically, whether intended or not. World class and ordinary club players alike have learned a lot from computers. Diligent students are able to make much faster progress than before.
In a nutshell, chess has absorbed the latest technological revolution as easily as it has absorbed other fundamental changes in the past, such as the evolution of

professionalism and the introduction of the chess clock. From the time of its origin – which is undocumented but likely goes back a couple of millennia to India – chess has adapted to changing cultures and different societies. It has survived devastating wars, religious persecution and gloomy episodes when it was thought that its possibilities had been exhausted. It has been a game for royalty as well as for the coffee houses, for the patient as well as for the impatient and – in a modern context – in the living room as well as on the internet.

This book does not give a complete overview of the history of chess. It is not until the 19th century that the chess world becomes more or less recognisable to the player of today so this is where we make our starting point. However, first we must look at someone from the 18th century, someone who was way ahead of his time and who must be viewed as the founder of chess as we know it today, not just because of his astounding success as a player, but also because he put down in writing his understanding of the game. He came, saw, conquered *and* analysed in detail why it was that he conquered. What more can a man do?

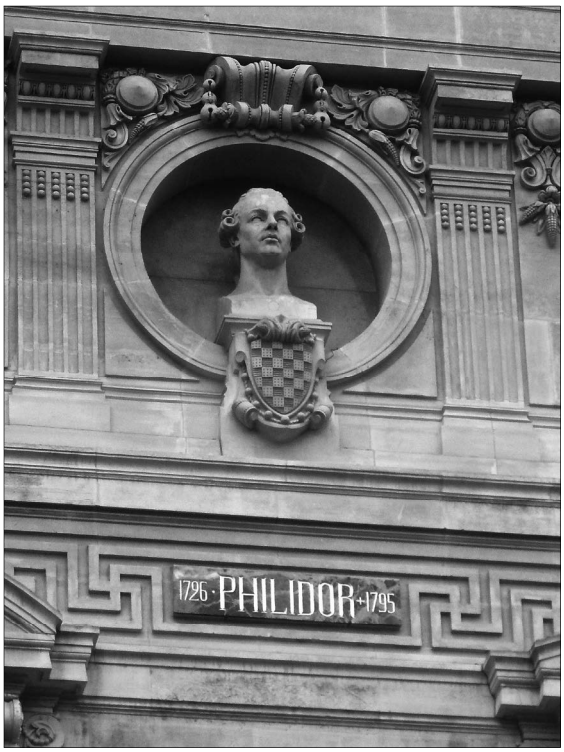
François-André Danican Philidor

François-André Danican Philidor (1726-1795) was born into a family of prominent musicians in France. Following in the footsteps of his father, grandfather and many other family members he too became a musician and it soon transpired that he was extremely talented. He became one of the leading composers of the day, specialising in the then highly popular genre of the *opéra comique*. From a very young age he also developed a passion – and perhaps an even greater talent – for the game of chess.

In those days chess was mainly being played in coffee houses in a few countries in Europe and nothing even faintly resembling a supraregional organisation existed. The concept of a World Championship was unknown and there was virtually no international contact. Yet the path to the top for a young, ambitious and talented chess player was basically the same as it is today, namely to go out into the world and beat the best players you meet, preferably in a match over many games in order to leave as little doubt as possible about your moral right to call yourself the strongest.

Yet at the end of this trajectory, having beaten everyone who stood in your way, there would be no official title for you, though *unofficial* recognition would be just the same as it is now.

A vital precondition for following such a career was of course the possibility to travel, which to the ordinary man was far from self-evident in the eighteenth century. However Philidor was able to do this thanks to his 'other' life as a famous musician. Having earned his first chess laurels in the famous Café de la Régence in Paris, his musical career brought him first to the Dutch Republic and then to England, where in 1747 he convincingly won a match against the Syrian-born Philippe Stamma, who until then held the reputation of being the best player in the world. He also demolished the best English player of the day, Abraham Janssen and when on his return to Paris Philidor formally defeated his former teacher François Antoine Kermur de Legal in a match as well he was widely acclaimed as the best player in the world.



Philidor's bust on the Opéra Garnier in Paris (photo Paul van der Sterren)

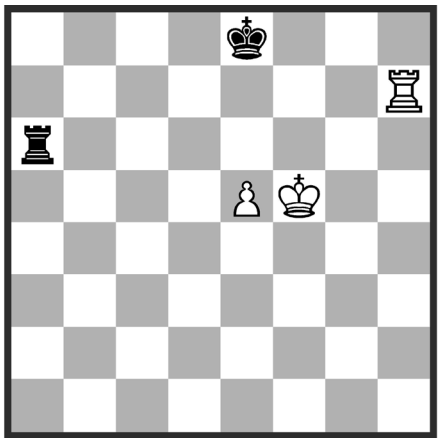
Yet Philidor's real claim to fame was still to come, because what really set him apart from anyone else in the history of chess was his incredible *longevity* as a champion. He would remain unbeaten in matches until his death in 1795, a period of half a century! Not even the generation of his grandchildren was able to overthrow him.

Wherever he went, Philidor would lecture, both on music and chess, and astonish large audiences with his demonstrations of blindfold chess. He was the first to play two or three games simultaneously without seeing the board (his opponents played without this handicap), which caused an absolute sensation at the time. He

also wrote a manual of chess that would remain *the* standard text book for almost a century: *L'Analyze des Échecs*. In this book he gives a complete and systematic overview of all phases of the game and how they should be played and understood.

He was the first to point out that it is always the placement of the pawns that characterises any given position and that maintaining a healthy and flexible pawn structure should be a major strategic aim.
His axiom "the pawn is the soul of chess" has become a famous and popular saying. Based on these views, after the opening moves 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 he advocated 2…d6 rather than the more popular 2…♘c6 which blocks the c-pawn. This opening was later named after him.

Since writing down your moves when playing a game of chess was still a practically unknown phenomenon in the eighteenth century, we unfortunately can't really appreciate how his many successes as a player came about. It is true that some fragments of his games have made it into today's databases, but their authenticity is doubtful and it is likely that these are mostly fictitious games invented by him for the purpose of teaching or demonstrating a particular point he wanted to make. A much better way for us to honour him is to look at one of the instructional positions from *L'Analyze des Échecs* that has stood the test of time magnificently. This is a position, or rather a defensive *method*, which was, is and always will be of fundamental importance to the theory – and practice! – of rook endings, and has gone down in history as 'Philidor's position':



Rook endings occur remarkably often in practical play. Although they will usually start with many pawns on each side they very often result in one of a limited number of standard positions with just one or two pawns left.
This is one of those positions. White has succeeded in cutting off the black king on the back rank and advancing his king and pawn to the fifth rank.

Yet although the black king's movement is limited it does stop the white pawn from promoting on e8. The question is: can White make any progress from here?

What Philidor demonstrated is that black can hold this position fairly easily if his rook keeps guarding the sixth rank until White pushes his pawn to e6. If it is White to move his only reasonable try is to play **1.e6**.
This creates the threat of 2.♔f6, when Black either gets mated (for example 1.e6 ♖b6 2.♔f6 ♖b1 3.♖h8 mate) or has to give up the blockade of the pawn (for example 1.e6 ♖b6 2.♔f6 ♔d8 3.♖h8+ ♔c7 4.♔f7 and the pawn advance e6-e7-e8♕ becomes unstoppable).

Yet if Black is alert to this threat he can ward off the danger once and for all by playing **1…♖a1!** with the intention of meeting **2.♔f6** with **2…♖f1+**. White's king doesn't have a good hiding place: if **3.♔e5** Black will keep checking from behind (**3…♖e1+ 4.♔d6 ♖d1+**) until the white king moves away from his pawn far enough for the danger to pass. If in the diagrammed position it is Black to move, he should do something which keeps this defensive mechanism intact, for instance **1…♖b6**. What he should most certainly *not* do is play the impatient 1…♖a1? for this allows White to play 2.♔f6! when it is too late to go back (2…♖a6+ 2.e6!), but also too early to start checking from behind: with his pawn still on e5 White now has the safe square e6 for his king (2…♖f1+ 3.♔e6!). Suddenly Black is in big trouble. It is true that he can still draw this position (only just) when he moves his king to the right side (2…♖f1+ 3.♔e6 ♔f8! 4.♖h8+ ♔g7) *and* finds one or two only moves in the ensuing position, but that particular defensive mechanism is much more difficult.

Philidor's position offers Black an *easy* draw if he is patient enough to wait for white's pawn to move to e6 and only then starts checking from behind. Anyone who has understood this principle well enough to use it in a practical game has laid a strong and necessary foundation for the study of more complex rook endings.

The match La Bourdonnais – McDonnell, 1834

Even before Philidor's death in 1795 chess life (and life in general) had come to an almost complete stop due to the revolution, civil war and terror that France had poured upon itself, then over the rest of Europe. It wasn't until the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 that peace finally settled over the ravaged continent, leaving millions of people dead and most of the countries involved devastated. Perhaps chess was still popular during these terrible years, but it could of course only be played on a small scale. There were no major events and consequently no famous names emerged.

The first player to make a name for himself after the Napoleonic Wars was a veteran of the French Army, Alexandre Deschapelles (1780-1847). He was the archetypal *player*, a man who never read a chess book, wouldn't have dreamed of writing one himself and excelled not just at chess, but also at whist, backgammon and billiards.
However it wasn't until around 1820 when a brilliant pupil of his, Louis-Charles Mahé de La Bourdonnais (1797?-1840), arrived on the scene, and sporadic encounters between English and French players were resumed, that chess really started to come to life again. La Bourdonnais soon overtook his teacher as France's leading player. He followed in the footsteps of Philidor by writing a textbook (*Nouveau Traité du Jeu des échecs*) and co-founded the first ever chess journal (*Le Palamède*).

Having crushed all opposition in France, La Bourdonnais left for England to seek new challenges and there he was to become legendary for winning the first truly epoch-making *and* well-publicised match in the history of chess. His opponent in this historic encounter, which took place in 1834, was Alexander McDonnell (1798-1835), an Irishman who lived in London and was considered the best of the 'British' players. (At that time Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom.) Their marathon match was in reality six consecutive matches, probably because the loser of each match would insist upon an immediate rematch, and it was only in hindsight that this came to be regarded as one long epic battle. La Bourdonnais won four of the first five matches and lost one. The final match of the series was abandoned for reasons which have never been clear, with the score slightly in McDonnell's favour. Another mystery that surrounds the match is the total number of games played. One source quotes a number of 85, another says 88, a third and a fourth say 91 and 92, while La Bourdonnais himself in *Le Palamède* makes it a round 100. One thing is clear though: La Bourdonnais scored an overwhelming victory. Based on the most often quoted number of 85, the overall score was 45-27 in his favour with just 13 draws.

La Bourdonnais

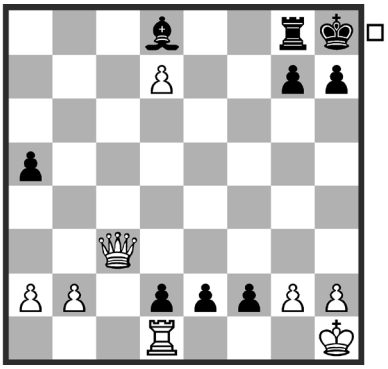
Interest in the match was huge. For the first time all moves were recorded, published and annotated. The moves were not recorded by the players themselves – that would not become standard until several decades later – but by a secretary. One of the consequences was that chess players from all over the world started to model their own opening repertoire on that of the top players. Those openings were thoroughly investigated and criticised, making opening theory a more public affair than it had ever been.

The players themselves also made a significant impression on the audience, mainly because of their very different characters. La Bourdonnais played fast, was extroverted and let his emotions run wild as the course of the battle gave him reason to do so. He was a *bon vivant*, conversed loudly with people in the audience, and if a game was finished he would immediately start playing for money against all comers, often until late into the night. McDonnell on the other hand, played

extremely slowly (there were no limitations at all on how long a player was allowed to think), went home exhausted after every game and always kept a stiff upper lip, no matter what happened. They must have nettled each other tremendously.

A match over so many games is of course a treasure trove of memorable moments, yet one position in particular has become so famous that it can be seen as emblematic of the whole match. Say "La Bourdonnais-McDonnell" and you say this:

♙ McDonnell, Alexander
♟ La Bourdonnais, Louis Charles Mahé de
🌍 London 1834



This is the final position of game 62, or more accurately game 16 of the fourth match. Black's last move was

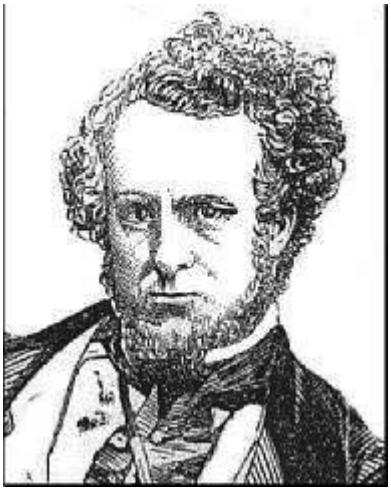
37... e2

White, McDonnell, resigned. He is a queen up, but against the tidal wave of black pawns he is as powerless as a sandcastle against incoming water. If people ask me what is so beautiful about chess I like to show them this position.

La Bourdonnais has been called the first chess professional, because for at least the last ten years of his life he had no income other than his chess earnings. He died in poverty in London at the age of (probably) 43 yet by then McDonnell had been dead for six years. He died less then a year after the match, possibly of physical and mental exhaustion. Even in those days chess was not taken lightly by those who truly loved it.

The First Tournament: London 1851

When La Bourdonnais died in 1840 the chess world was left with a power vacuum. Neither his home country France, which had dominated chess for well over a century, nor the United Kingdom, where the most recent challengers had come from, could provide a player of La Bourdonnais' stature. However, before the chess world would finally spread its wings, representatives of these two countries were to battle it out for the highest honour one last time. The Frenchman Pierre de Saint-Amant (1800-1872) and the Englishman Howard Staunton (1810-1874) met in Paris in 1843 to decide who would have the moral right to call himself La Bourdonnais' successor. Staunton won with a score of 13-8 (11 victories, six losses and four draws). He impressed with the quality of his opening preparation, an aspect of the game that had only just begun to come under serious scrutiny now that people were beginning to write down their moves and chess literature was taking shape. Staunton introduced the opening move 1.c4, which was named the English Opening after him. He was also the first to bring along helpers, who were called seconds, after the assistants in a duel.



Howard Staunton

Yet even before Staunton's match was over chess players from several countries were calling out for a more modern way to decide who was best. In common with the world in general, the chess world was changing, becoming more lively, more international and perhaps even more democratic. The concept of a tournament (instead of a match) was introduced and the term 'World Champion' could be heard. (The honour of being the first to be thus called – albeit incidentally – goes to Staunton.) And so the first modern chess tournament was held in London in 1851. All the best players of the day were invited to take part, so the unmistakable (yet not official) intention was to determine the best player in the world. But the tournament was still widely seen as an experiment only, so the winner (about whom we will have a little more to say below) didn't quite come to have the general acclaim he perhaps deserved.

However new the formula, in many respects this first tournament was still firmly rooted in tradition, consisting of matches in what we would today call a knock-out format. In round one sixteen participants played eight matches, the eight winners going through to the next round and so on until the two strongest players faced each other in the final. In this way sixteen players rather than just two, were given the chance to prove themselves. This principle, to involve many more than two players in the struggle for world supremacy, would not be widely accepted until after the Second World War, so in this respect "London 1851" was far ahead of its time. Purely as a way to organise a chess event, the tournament formula was an immediate success. Within decades tournaments became the backbone not only of international chess, but of chess on all levels. It turned out to be simply more fun to have a group of opponents competing against each other instead of just two: a tournament provided more tension, more drama and many more beautiful games. However, matches, being head-to-head fights, did not disappear. They remained what they had always been: the purest of all formats, ideal for establishing which of just two players was the strongest: ideal for a World Championship.

Adolf Anderssen (1818-1879) from Germany was the winner of the London 1851 tournament. He won all his matches with a clear margin, defeating pre-tournament favourite Staunton in the semi-finals. His victory meant that the chess world finally transcended the long rivalry between England and France and became more truly international. Anderssen was to remain one of the world's best players until his death in 1879 and many of his major rivals (and successors if we call him the world's best) originated, like him, from Central Europe.

Adolf Anderssen

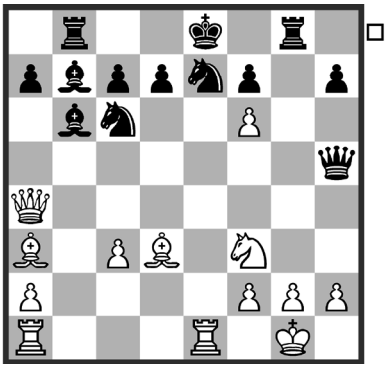
For Staunton, London 1851 signalled the end of his active career. From a chess player he turned into a chess writer. Until his death in 1874 he devoted himself not only to his professional career as a Shakespeare expert, but also to his work for the first English chess magazine *Chess Player's Chronicle*, (founded by him), his chess column in the *London Illustrated News* and to the writing of books.

He wrote the first-ever tournament book (about London 1851) and a number of very well-received chess manuals, of which *The Chess-Player's Handbook* has become the most famous – still in print, some 170 years after first publication! Staunton's name is also inextricably bound up with the first chess set to be used as an international standard and in this way made an important contribution to the unification of the chess world. The Staunton design set is still the preferred set for almost every major tournament today.

If Staunton was what we might call a veritable chess *scholar*, his 'successor' Adolf Anderssen was a *player* above all. In matches he would be defeated by Paul Morphy in 1858 and by Wilhelm Steinitz in 1866 – see the next two chapters – but as a tournament player he was astoundingly succesful. After his victory in London 1851 he also won the first ever round-robin tournament in 1862, again in London, with the fantastic score of 12 points from 13 games. In fact after 1866, at a time when tournament life all over Europe virtually exploded, he won almost everywhere he played. Yet Anderssen's most enduring claim to fame lies in his extremely imaginative playing style. Always on the lookout for attacking chances and gifted with unique combinative vision he destroyed many of his opponents in brilliant style. His two most famous games have even been given nicknames, a rarity in chess literature: one is called the Immortal Game, the other the Evergreen Game. Here is the finish of the Evergreen Game:

Jean Dufresne

♙ Anderssen, Adolf
♟ Dufresne, Jean
Berlin 1852



Position after: 18... ♖g8

White is a piece down, but that doesn't trouble him, because Black's knight on e7 is pinned and can't be saved. A more serious problem is that Black is threatening to capture another piece (19...♕xf3), when White's king would be in grave danger. Anderssen's solution is as simple as it is far-sighted.

19. ♖ad1!

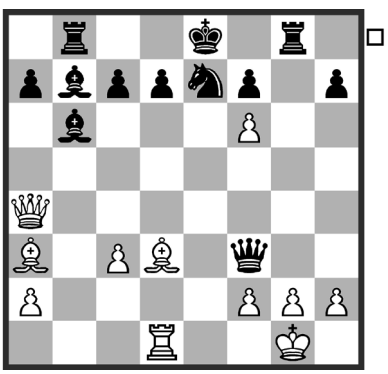
At first glance this move seems to betray an almost astonishing degree of naivety. Not only does White not take immediate action, he doesn't even parry the big threat. What the move does do however is involve the second rook in the attack and that outweighs all the negatives.
In a position where all eyes are on e7 Anderssen has seen that it is not this square but d7 which is the real weak link in Black's defence. It is a superb demonstration of cool-headedness and combinative power at the very highest level. Rather more mundanely you might also call it setting a trap, into which Dufresne falls.

19... ♕xf3?

The position is enormously complex. Later analysis has shown that Black has a whole series of better moves, including 19...♖g4, 19...♖xg2+, 19...♗d4 and 19...♕h3. But what concerns us here is what follows now:

20. ♖xe7+! ♘xe7?

Dufresne obviously doesn't see what is coming. He could still have put up a fierce resistance with 20... ♔d8! 21. ♖xd7+! ♔c8!.



Position after: 20... ♘xe7?

21. ♕xd7+!

Having already sacrificed a rook and a knight and under severe threat of mate

himself White sacrifices his queen as well – and forces mate.

21... ♔xd7 22. ♗f5+

Double check! Both the rook on d1 and the bishop on f5 are unprotected, but neither can be taken.

22... ♔e8

22... ♔c6 23. ♗d7 is mate in one.

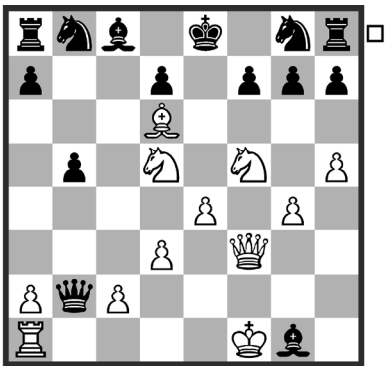
23. ♗d7+ ♔f8 24. ♗xe7 Mate.

Anderssen must have had a nose for combinations like this. It is not just a matter of being able to calculate the variations to perfection (though that is most certainly a requirement!), but of somehow 'knowing' they are there.

Perhaps even more spectacular is the finale of the Immortal Game:

Image from the tournament where the 'Immortal Game' was played.

♙ Anderssen, Adolf
♟ Kieseritzky, Lionel
🌍 London 1851



Position after: 18... ♗xg1

White has already sacrificed a rook and a bishop and there is another rook *en prise* on a1 with check. Yet a player like Anderssen is unconcerned by material considerations like this, spotting underneath something of a higher order: a mating net, and with his next move he closes it.

19. e5!

Cutting off Black's queen from the defence of his king. The threat is mate in two: 20.♘xg7+ ♔d8 21.♗c7+. Black has no way of protecting g7, so his only hope is covering the c7-square. First he captures the rook.

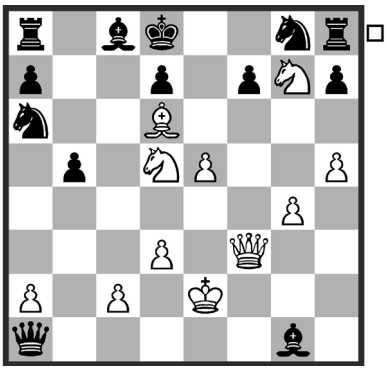
19... ♕xa1+ 20. ♔e2

The white king is in no danger here. Now Black has to make the defensive move

20... ♘a6

but it is just not good enough.

21. ♘xg7+ ♔d8



Position after: 21... ♔d8

22. ♕f6+! ♘xf6 23. ♗e7

Mate. Three minor pieces defeating an almost entirely intact army. The possibility of such a concept is one of the factors that makes chess such a beautiful game.