

Misha Interviews...

Misha Savinov



Interview with Levon Aronian

Levon Aronian. Born in 1982. Currently No. 10 in the world rankings, FIDE rating 2724. The bronze medalist of the 2005 European Championship. Lives in Berlin, Germany. He is a rare example of a player confidently crossing 2700 without taking part in elite round-robin tournaments. He is also an excellent blitz player and is reverentially referred to as a genius on one of the Russian chess forums. He is also a two-time winner of the world's largest Chess960 (Fischer random) open tournament in Mainz – a form of chess that first and foremost requires imagination and an ability to quickly grasp the essence of a position.

Misha Savinov: The average chess fan may not be well acquainted with the name Levon Aronian, who now has a 2724 Elo! They might ask: Who is he? Where did he come from?

Lev Aronian: I was born and raised in Armenia. When I was 18, I moved to Germany, and played in various leagues. My results were rather mediocre, and my Elo was around 2530-2550. It was only after I began studying chess with my friends, Ara Minasian and Gabriel Sargissian, that I began to gain points in team events. I've never won any serious tournament. I recently enjoyed some nice wins and seldom lost, so I crossed 2700. (+31 compared to the previous rating list! – MS). However, I should say that my play does not conform to such a high rating.



MS: Do you have invitations to any forthcoming elite tournaments?

LA: Yes! I am invited to Wijk aan Zee 2006.

MS: Are you prepared to meet the greats?

LA: No, of course, I'm not. I lack opening preparation. However, I'm planning to study some openings in December. My only advantage over those beasts is total ignorance and a freshness of thinking.

MS: Tell us about your family.

LA: I was the second child in our family. My father is a physicist who studies lasers. He was a researcher until the break up of the Soviet Union, when he had to quit because there was no funding for science in Armenia. He had several discoveries and patents, which didn't bring him much money in Soviet times, of course. My mother is a specialist in explosions.

MS: Explosions?! What does she explode?

LA: Mountains, buildings... It's an uncommon profession. I remember a Portuguese TV crew visited us when I was 6 to interview my mother. However, in Germany, my parents can't find a job within their field.

MS: Why did you move?

LA: There were hard times in Armenia. Chess sponsorship was scarce, I was not a member of the national team, and my only opportunity was to play in the German Bundesliga, so we decided to move.

MS: When did you start playing?

LA: I was 9 years old. My first teacher was my elder sister. It happened when we were visiting our father's native town in Belarus. I had a great talent for annoying and exasperating her. So she taught me chess.

MS: In order to beat you legally?

LA: (laughs) No, in order to get me to stop bothering her. So I played at home, and then went to a Pioneer's Palace. I spent about two months there and met my first coach, Melikset Khachian, who now lives in the U.S. We started working together, and he even lived in our apartment. This continued until I was 15. I played in junior tournaments and was world champion U-12 in 1994.

MS: Did your parents buy any chess clocks to reward you?

LA: No, they didn't, because I had won many clocks in tournaments! I always won prizes in rapid and blitz events in Yerevan. My best results were 9 out of 9 and 7 out of 7 in rapids. I was very proud, beating 1 GM and 5 IMs. In 1996, after the Chess Olympiad in Armenia a great load of chess clocks appeared and they were used as prizes in local tournaments. At one point I possessed 5 clocks, which I gave away to friends.

MS: Did you only study chess with Khachian?

LA: No, I spent about two months with Arsen Yegiazarian, and also worked

with Arshak Petrosian. However, it was Khachian who took me as a third-category player and made me an IM.

MS: Can you reveal his teaching method?

LA: We solved studies, analyzed classical games...

MS: What kind of classical games?

LA: Games by old masters. It often transpires, when discussing the history of chess with friends, that I am quite educated in this matter.

MS: Old masters such as Tarrasch and Schlechter, or more extreme ones – Lipke, Suechting...

LA: (laughs) No, I don't know Lipke's games. I had a book *First Russian Masters* (Petroff and others), for example. We had a good chess library. My parents once sold something to buy many chess books, which I immediately began to study. We worked quite extensively, at least 4-5 hours a day until I was 12. I played blindfolded, and solved many combinations and studies without a board...

MS: Maybe you'll be invited to Monaco? One rarely sees players including blindfolded games in their regular training. Which characteristics does it develop?



LA: (laughs) How merchant-like! It actually develops one's calculation. After solving positions we studied classical games and, in the end of each lesson, played blitz. We really played it *a lot*. The most important thing was that I greatly enjoyed the lessons.

MS: Did you have any preferences among the old masters?

LA: I was very impressed by Alekhine's game collection – a green tattered book. I really liked playing over his games. Another well-read book was Lisitsyn's *Final Stage of a Chess Game*; a very good endgame manual, which I studied carefully in order to understand endings.

MS: Do you remember your first game against a grandmaster?

LA: No, not really. I remember I was extremely happy to defeat Kholmov in the first round in Capelle-la-Grande, 1997. One of my first wins against a GM was over Sergey Movsesian. Asrian and I had a 2310 rating, and we played in the Armenian higher league against all kinds of beasts, both scoring quite well. Movsesian arrived with an Elo around 2630, and lost to me and Karen.

MS: Was Asrian one of your main rivals in your age group?

LA: Yes. One could call him my arch-rival in most junior tournaments.

MS: And who usually won?

LA: Actually, I did.

MS: Was there anyone you had difficulties playing against?

LA: Sargissian used to defeat me in every single game. I was 2570 or something, and he had beaten me twice in a row in a childish manner.

MS: What do you mean? Some Closed Sicilian, pawn race and mate?

LA: No: he played 1.Nf3 and 2.c4, exchanged something, and then I just resigned with hopelessly weak pawns. A very unpleasant manner to deal with! It is typical Gabriel – he studied a lot of “Karpovism.” Ara Minasian also used to crush me quite often. So, I suffered mostly from my friends (laughs).

MS: Is there an Armenian playing style?

LA: We are very different, but we all have a common grief – opening ignorance.

MS: Why?

LA: Our post service is not working properly – we don’t get the Informants in time (laughs). No, seriously, we are just lazy. Lazy and very optimistic. We all believe in our lucky star.

MS: In what style did you prefer to win in those days?

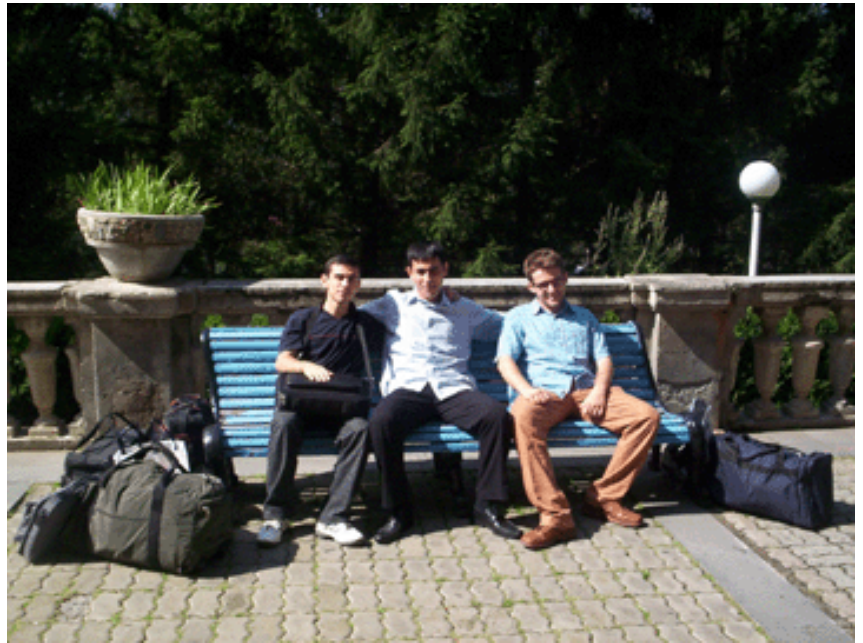
LA: I was especially excited about domination, where I place all the pieces properly, and my opponent has no moves. This was my greatest satisfaction. Later Larsen’s *My 50 Games* became my chess bible.

MS: A wonderful book!

LA: I tried to copy his style. He remained my favorite player for many years. Larsen had great confidence and was a bit too impulsive. He is an extremely interesting chess player, although I don't think he had a chance of becoming the world champion.

MS: Do you have some of Larsen's traits?

LA: Yes, I like jumping with my pieces here and there and pushing the pawns. Normally it makes my position just rotten. But then I try to create some active play, increase tension, look for tricks. I enjoy crooked positions.



Aronian with Friends

MS: Do you mean rich with opportunities, complicated, irrational?

LA: Hmm, "crooked" is a nicer word in my opinion.

MS: What is your main skill?

LA: Confidence!

MS: And in the chess sense?

LA: (after some thought) I don't know! I don't see any areas in which I am sufficiently strong, except impudence and the desire to outplay the opponent. And this is only when I have White. With Black I am an average GM, I always play for equality, and usually don't mind draws. I have to work on my opening repertoire to play sharper. So far it is completely defensive.

MS: What else would you like to develop in your chess?

LA: Tactical vision. Sometimes my blunders are real joke.

MS: Do you remember a blitz tournament, in which you took first place and defeated Kasparov? What were your impressions about it?

LA: Naturally, I remember! Somehow it felt very easy to defeat strong players, although it was my first experience. I did not expect it. Also I liked that I was very calm during the games. Of course, winning against Kasparov was more luck than skill, but blitz is blitz!

MS: Was it your only game against Kasparov?

LA: Yes.

MS: So, the score is 1-0?

LA: (Laughs, and nods affirmatively)

MS: What does the term chess understanding mean to you?

LA: It is knowledge of typical positions and patterns. If you played a certain position many times, or analyzed it well, you feel confident in similar positions.

MS: Does this set of typical positions vary among the top grandmasters?

LA: Yes, I think so. One who plays a single opening their entire life, probably knows fewer typical positions than someone with a wider repertoire. For example, Anand has excellent understanding, and Ivanchuk. I thought I had a good understanding, until I recently got a simple Ruy Lopez position against Karjakin in blitz, and gawked at it without a clue. There I understood that my knowledge is still very limited. Thus, chess understanding is basically knowledge.

MS: Do you train a lot?

LA: To be honest, I don't train at all now. I study chess only during training sessions. However, looking at the bright side, I always have freshness. And I almost always play interesting chess.

MS: Do you pay attention to psychological considerations when playing?

LA: I never thought about it (pause). Actually, yes, I look at the opponent and consider his tastes.

MS: I was impressed when you sacrificed a piece early in the opening vs. GM Valery Popov, who sometimes loses his objectivity when he has a

material advantage...

LA: I recall that I wanted to impress a girl, and have her say, look what a move, what a player! Then I played it against Bu, and sacrificed to Filippov. I hope this sacrifice comes into fashion. In general, I learned that variation from Gabriel (Sargissian) – as well as a majority of my other opening variations.

MS: Are there any modern players, whose approach to chess is close to yours?

LA: Hmm, I can't think of any. There are certainly players I support. I always root for Shakhriyar Mamedyarov, and, of course, my aforementioned friends. Generally, I like people who invent new ideas and bring something new into chess.

MS: Upon reading your game annotations one could get the impression that both players usually play at a solid second category level...

LA: (Laughs loud) That's true. It is explained by the complexity of the positions and time troubles.

MS: Do you consciously strive for complications?

LA: If you want to beat a strong GM, you can hardly do it playing cautiously. In order to win, you need to drive him into your territory, to feel comfortable and confident.

MS: And you are comfortable in wild positions?

LA: You've got it. I like situations when everything hangs.

MS: An anarchic style!

LA: I don't think chess has much in common with politics.

MS: Chaotic?

LA: That's better.

MS: How do you behave at the board? Do you write the moves before or after making them?

LA: I obey the rules! First I make a move, and then I write it down.



Aronian at the 2005 Aeroflot Open

MS: Do you walk around during the game?

LA: I walk a great deal and look at other positions. I also talk a lot, but I think it is a bad habit. Chatting during the game will be completely banned someday. Recently I played in the Spanish league, where they do not allow it, and I felt quite comfortable.

MS: Does Peter Svidler play in the Spanish league?

LA: No, he promptly refused when he found out about the rule (laughs).

MS: Do you often get into a time trouble?

LA: Only when I am in good form.

MS: What is the connection?

LA: When I feel the potential, I invest more effort into playing, and if I'm in poor form or have no energy, I tend to play superficially and quickly make obvious moves.

MS: You are one of the best Chess-960 players in the world...

LA: It is difficult to measure, as there aren't many tournaments nor many people playing it. However, I like Chess-960. There are fresh positions, not so overloaded with tactics in the opening. I enjoy it.

MS: What specific skills are required to succeed at it?

LA: The most important is that one has to seriously think about the very first moves. It is also important to sense positions, to "intuit," as they say in Moscow. A well-developed imagination is crucial as well.

MS: How do you decide on the first moves?

LA: Gabrielian told me that the best opening approach is similar to normal chess – the first move must free one of the bishops. But I am not so sure. First I just look at the initial position, deciding where to bring my pieces and how to seize the center. Of course, controlling the center is paramount. However, it is not always possible, and then you have to think about restricting the opponent's play.

MS: Did you master its complicated method of castling quickly?

LA: Usually I postpone it for as long as I can! In the beginning I try to develop my pieces harmoniously.

MS: Is there already an established elite in Chess-960?

LA: No. There are too few people playing. You know, sometimes I compare regular chess and Chess-960 with two forms of jazz, swing and bop. Swing is casual, everybody listens to it. Bop is different: you don't know what you play in the beginning. You just play and see what happens. A free-style jazz. Naturally, bop doesn't have as many supporters, and mastering bop is more difficult. One must have so many melodies in one's head to play bop. This is similar to Chess-960 – one needs to learn many more positional patterns to survive.

MS: Do you live with your parents?

LA: No, I live alone in an apartment in Berlin. My parents' apartment isn't too far, though.

MS: Do you earn a living only by playing chess?

LA: Yes, I only play chess.

MS: Do you spend much time on the Internet?

LA: No, I quit ICC blitz. I figured out it is better to spend time watching movies and reading books.

MS: What kind of films do you like?

LA: Classical ones. I enjoy Hitchcock, Fellini, and some other directors.

MS: What do you read?

LA: Now I am reading *The Idiot* by Dostoyevsky – somehow I became interested in Russian classics. My favorite authors are Orwell -- especially

his biographical books, Gogol, Hemingway, and maybe Zoschenko. Also I enjoy Mayakovsky's poetry! Although I have a friend who says Mayakovsky was a scoundrel.

MS: Perhaps a piece of creative work could be assessed without referring to the personality of the author?

LA: No, these things are connected. This is why I don't believe Mayakovsky was such a bad person.

MS: What are your plans for the near future?

LA: First I'll go to Italy to play some team chess, and then I have a tournament in Armenia with Ivanchuk, Short, Dreev and some other strong players which will take place in October.

MS: Coinciding with the world championship?

LA: (laughing) Right, but we'll have our own world championship.

MS: Do you like making forecasts by the way?

LA: I like reading them. Well, and making them, too.

MS: So?

LA: What, you want me to guess who wins the world championship? Hmm... Polgar! This could be interesting. Consider it my wish rather than a forecast.

Levon Aronian Annotates

L. Aronian-A. Huzman

2005 European Championship

Queen's Indian Defense [E15]

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3

I had prepared 3.g3, but I changed my mind at the board and decided to enter a modern variation, which I had only looked briefly before the tournament.

3...b6 4.g3 Ba6 5.b3 Bb4+ 6.Bd2 Be7 7.Nc3 0-0 8.Rc1

After this move my opponent thought for almost 20 minutes, which inspired me. It was only when he began executing his next moves instantly that I realized this was just a matter of choosing a particular line, and not the

confusion I had anticipated.

8...d5

In this relatively fresh position Black has tried 8...c6, which looks suspicious to me, as well as the exotic 8...Ba3 9.Rc2 Nc6!?, which will hardly find any supporters beyond its brave creator. The only remaining alternative is 8...Bb7.

9.cxd5 exd5



A novelty, according to my database; however, the game soon arrives at a standard position from the 7.Bg2 d5 variation because of White's schematic play. An interesting position appears after 9...Nxd5, if White follows in the footsteps of Topalov, who is a major specialist in this line: 10.Nxd5 exd5 11.Bg2 Re8 12.Rc2 Bd6 13.Bg5 Bb4+ 14.Kf1. Having analyzed such positions, I concluded that it is difficult to find the best moves if one doesn't know them

beforehand. Some players discarded the variation as White because of 11...Re8.

10.Bg2

I was surprised by my opponent's last move and so spent 7 minutes on this obvious reply. Indeed, it's hard to believe that such a quiet move can claim an advantage. I assumed that my opponent wants to play ...c5, and therefore I decided against Van Wely's original 10.Bh3!?, because the text-move targets the d5-pawn. I can't imagine why the bishop would be better on h3.

10...Bb7 11.0-0 Nbd7 12.Qc2

Here I thought for 10 minutes. I wanted to play 12.Ne5, but I didn't like 12...Re8 13.Bf4 Nf8. I also recalled the game Lundin-Botvinnik where White recklessly advanced with his pieces in a similar position, only to be driven back by Black, who then proceeded to victory. Then I decided to protect the e4-square and place the rooks on d1 and e1 to ensure my well-being in the event of danger.

12...Re8 13.Bf4

I don't know how to explain this move. The bishop is no better here than on d2. I became dissatisfied with 13.Rfe1 because of 13...Nf8 14.Ne5 Ne6, and contrary to my aggressive plan I have to play 15.e3. My teachers told me to

meet ...Nf8 with Nh4, but here the situation is complicated by the dark-squared weaknesses on the queenside. As nothing decent comes to my mind, I guess Black already has nothing to worry about.

13...c6 14.Rcd1

I played this after 8-minutes of reflection, having calculated 14...Nf8 15.e4 Nxe4 16.Nxe4 dxe4 17.Qxe4 Bb4 18.Qf5, and Black has no time to take the rook on f1 in view of Ne5. I figured that if Black plays 14...Bb4 then White has nothing better than 15.Bd2, since 15.Rfe1 looks highly suspicious. The reliability of White's position in closed openings is truly amazing; even after so many pointless moves his position is OK.

14...Nh5 15.Kh1

I expected that 15.Bc1 would be met by 15...Bb4 etc., for example, 16.e3 Nhf6. I made this seemingly foolhardy move, after thinking for 12-minutes, in order to complicate things as I wanted to avoid situations where Black has an easy game.

15...Bb4

Checking White's intentions.

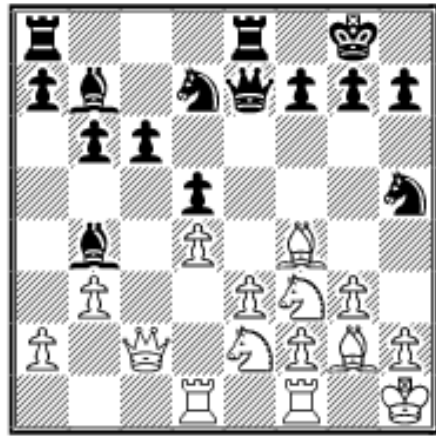
16.e3

I did not consider anything else as I had already decided to leave the bishop trapped outside the pawn chain. This dubious idea worked.

16...Qe7

A solid move that does not spoil anything, but it was better to increase the tension with 16...h6. White would have to play very precisely to avoid difficulties. I considered 17.Ne2, and if 17...g5, then 18.g4 with a sharp position in all variations. For example, 18...Nxf4 (18...Nhf6 19.Bg3 Nxf4 20.h3 Nxf6 21.Ne5 with the idea of f4 gives White compensation; 18...gxf4 19.gxh5 fxe3 20.Bh3) 19.exf4 Ba6 20.Ng3 Bxf1 21.Bxf1 gxf4 22.Nf5, and I like White despite the material deficit. Maybe there is no direct refutation of the idea behind 16.e3.

17.Ne2

**17...h6**

The cause of all of Black's troubles. Now White gets active piece play. The natural 17...Ba6 could give Black a comfortable position: 18.Rg1 Qe4 19.Qb2 in case of 19...Qe6 20.Ne5 Nhf6. The tricky 19...Bxe2 20.Qxe2 Nf4 21.gxf4 Qxf4 is no good in view of 22.Ne5 Rxe5 23.dxe5 Qxe5 24.Bxd5 cxd5 25.Qg4. After 25...Bd6 26.Qg2 an amazing position arises: Black has obvious advantages, but risks losing because of White's irresistible threats.

18.Ne5 Nxe5

The careful 18...Qe6 was a sensible alternative to the interesting idea of trapping the bishop.

19.dxe5

Clearing a route for the knight.

19...g5

19...f6 offers no relief, as White has 20.Bf3 Nxf4 21.exf6 Qxf6 22.gxf4, and the play along the g-file seems to give White an edge.

20.Nd4 gxf4

But this is too much! There was no need to rush this capture. Black's position is quite playable after 20...Ng7 21.Nxc6 Qc5 22.Qxc5 Bxc5 23.Bxd5 a5.

21.gxf4

Now White's attack outweighs Black's extra piece.

21...Ng7

An attempt to seduce White with the c6-pawn, but it's too late. The attack develops using natural moves and without any obstacles.

22.Rg1 Kh8 23.Bf3

Here I resisted the tempting 23.Bxd5 because I disliked 23...cxd5 24.Rxg7 Kxg7 25.Nf5+ Kh8 26.Nxe7 Rxe7, and suddenly Black has attacking

chances.

23...Rg8 24.Rg3 Ne6

24...Qd7 doesn't help, as after 25.Rdg1 Black can't play 25...Ne6 because of 26.Qf5 Rxf3 27.Rxf3 Qe7 28.Rh3 +/-.

25.Rh3

This is the correct move-order, as after 25.Nf5 Black gets off cheap: 25...Rxf3 26.Nxe7 Rxf3, although Black's situation is still bitter upon the computer move 27.Ng6+.

25...Rg6 26.Nf5

Here the materialistic 26.f5 could give Black some hope: 26...Ng5 27.Rh4 c5 28.fg cd. A player more experienced in the technical phase would prefer 26.Nxe6 Rxe6 27.f5, but I thought that mate was near and looked for the simplest means.

26...Qf8

26...Qc5 is ineffective after 27.Qb1, and Black hasn't solved any problems with his king.

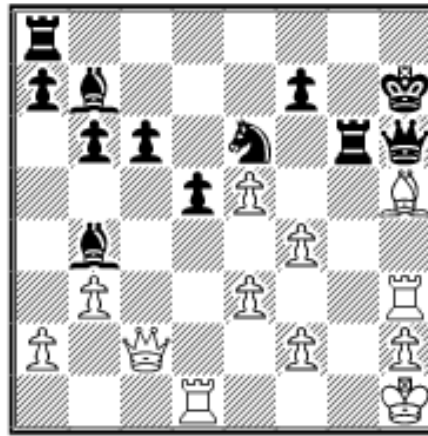
27.Bh5

I relaxed and almost committed a serious blunder, thinking that the game is won.

27...Kh7 28.Nxh6

The computer-generated 28.Nh4, planning f5, is very strong. But we have not yet matured for such deviousness.

28...Qxh6



29.Rg1

There are many ways to Rome, and I thought I picked the most effective one, counting on 29...Rg8 30.Qf5 1-0.

29...Kh8

Now I began to recall the Russian proverbs about birds and hares that you can't catch. It's terrible that I simply overlooked 29...Kh8, but I was fortunate that my next move doesn't change the evaluation.

30.Rxg6 fxc6 31.Bg4 Qxh3 32.Bxh3 Nf8 33.f5 Re8 34.f4 gxf5

I calculated the freeing 34...c5, but after 35.fxc6 Kg7 (35...d4+ 36.Bg2 Bxc6+ 37.Qxc6 and the threat on g7 doesn't allow Black a break) 36.Qf5 the queen enters Black's camp with devastating effect.

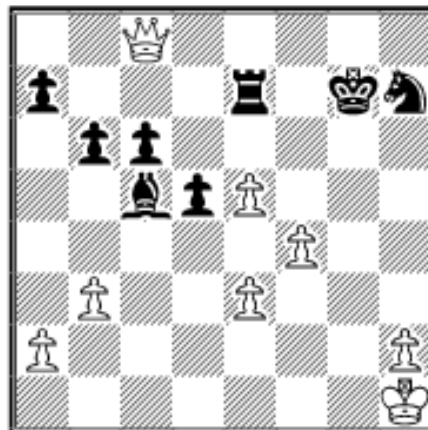
35.Qxf5 Nh7 36.Qd7

Despite being hypnotized by 36.Qh5 Re7 37.Bf5 c5 38.Bxh7 Rxh7 39.Qe8+ Kg7 40.f5 (missing 40.Qb8), I decided to swap bishops just to make sure.

36...Re7 37.Qd8+ Kg7 38.Bc8 Bxc8

Perhaps more stubborn is 38...Bc5, although it still loses to 39.Bxb7 Rxb7 40.Qc8 Rf7 41.Qxc6 Bxe3 42.e6 Rxf4 43.Qd7+.

39.Qxc8 Bc5



No better is 39...c5 40.Qc6 d4 41.Qd6.

40.Qxc6 Bxe3 41.Qd6

Maybe 41.f5 is simpler, but I secretly hoped for 41...Rf7 42.e6 with a triumphant pawn march.

41...Bc5 42.Qxd5 Nf8

An attempt to achieve salvation with a rook and bishop versus queen.

43.f5 Nd7 44.b4

This is decisive since taking on b4 leads to the loss of the bishop after 45.f6+, and 44...Rxe5 45.Qxd7+ Be7 46.Qxa7 is also hopeless. The rest is mere technique that only requires White to be attentive.

44...Nxe5 45.bxc5 bxc5 46.Qxc5 46...Kf6 47.Qd6+ Kf7 48.h4 Nd7 49.Qg6+ Kf8 50.Qh6+ Kf7 51.Qg6+ Kf8 52.h5 Rf7 53.Qd6+ Kg8 54.Qg6+ Rg7 55.Qe6+ Rf7 56.h6 Kf8 57.Qd6+ Ke8 58.Kg2 Nf8 59.f6 Rd7 60.Qc6 Kf7 61.Qxd7+ Black resigned.



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