

How to compose a draughts problem by Serge Yushkevitch

Tom Kieboom

An international contribution of our editor from Ukraine to the series “Hoe ontstaat een damprobleem?”.

As might have been expected, Serge has done quite a thorough job by including a lot of information from the draughts literature about the various ways known about where the inspiration comes from as well as which techniques are used to create draughts compositions.

Serge presents himself as a real didactic lecturer ‘draughts composing’, using transparent beautiful miniatures to show and explain these necessary principles and methods. In fact, his contribution was already there before the series in De Problemist began, *i.e.* through his chapter (with the same name) from his famous book ‘HISTORY OF PROBLEMISM’. Serge made for us a concept English translation of this chapter written in Russian, followed by some of my polishing into the ‘Dutch-based’ English arrangement below: an economical two-stroke written composition!

The word is now further given to Serge Yushkevitch

Sometimes the process of a problem composing is instantaneous improvisation, but, as a rule, it's hard work, many-hours' search for an idea, and careful analysis of possibilities to arrange it properly.

We cannot find a complete answer to the question ‘How to compose a problem?’ because no special study does exist until now, although some interesting publications are known covering this field.

After a concise literature overview, the two major methods of composing are illustrated with a number of miniatures, including the important aspect of ‘variation’ as an extra and important tool.

Literature survey

Evidently, G. Bonne made the first attempt to demonstrate different arrangements of one and the same idea. He led in 1900 for ‘La Tribune des Damistes’ a special section ‘Vivesection du problème’, in which he placed simultaneously several problems based on a certain idea. This demonstration was based on problems not published before, without any comment about the process of composing.

In 1910 C. Blankenaar published in ‘N. v. d. D.’ a small article (republished in HD, February 1934, pages 28-29), in which he shared his experience in endgame composing, although without examples of concrete steps during the composing process.

In 1961-1962 A. van der Stoep published articles in HD addressed to beginner problemists. He showed how to compose a problem if the end-position (‘a motif’) is taken as the start-point for composing.

In 1970 G. Post paid attention to the process of problem composing in his research ‘La censure du problémiste’ in ‘Blancs et Noirs’ (№ 108–113). He also described the rules of problemism in detail (based on those articles, the in Russian translated article ‘A talking at a cup of coffee’ was published in the Soviet magazine ‘Shashki’, № 11&12 1968 and № 1&4 1969). Useful advises about compositional methods are found in the book by D. Kalinskij and M. Stanovskij: ‘Shashechntj etud’ (‘Draughts endgame’, issued in 1958), written for the endgame genre on the 64-square board.

One may be surprised: why are advises of experts in endgame composition useful for people who compose draughts problems? The answer is: the process of composing in both genres are similar. Of course, a problemist should not copy all suggestions from ‘Shashechntj etud’, but a number of ideas proposed may be very helpful and can be rationally applied to the genre of composing draughts problems.

The character of the work for concrete draughts composing is described in several books: ‘Kombinacii na 100-kletочноj doske’ (‘Combinations on 100-square board’, issued in 1963) by A. Kovrizhkin;

'Kombinacii v mezhdunarodnyh shashkah' ('Combinations in International draughts', issued in 1984) by V. Bulat, V. Svizinskij and G. Hatskevitch; 'Shashechnaya kompozitsia. Sovremennyj vzglad' ('Draughts compositions. Modern sight', issued in 2003) by B. Ivanov. One of two principal methods of problem composing - 'step by step' from a thematic final to an initial position ('thematic final' here means a position appearing directly after the combination phase, *i.e.* 1x1 opposition, 46/5, naturel, winning at 'tric-trac' lines) - is analyzed in the book 'In de werkplaats van de problemist' (issued in 2000) by L. de Rooij.

A detailed description of the composing process of a problem is presented in the book 'Mir miniature' ('The world of miniatures', issued in 1994) by B. Shkitkin, V. Matus and S. Yushkevitch. The chapter 'About the technique of composing' is taken as the base for the present article.

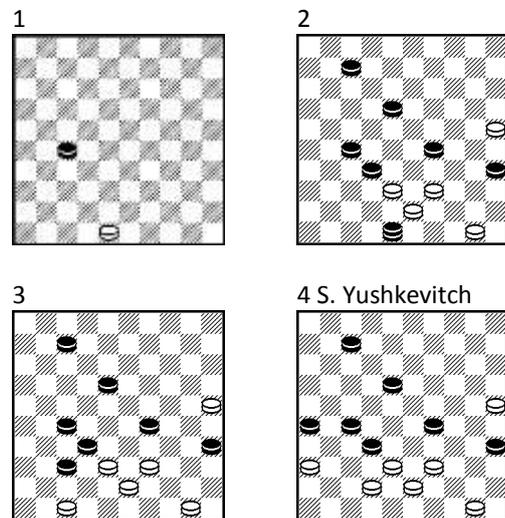
Principal methods

D. Kalinskij and M. Stanovskij defined two principal methods of composing: the first one is called the 'Step by step method', the second one is named the 'Reconnaissance method'. M. Val, a well-known Soviet problemist on the 64-square board, indicates a third method: '...having a known model, a problemist adds there something new' (see 'Shashki', April 1977).

The term 'known model' refers to already published positions. In a way, one should denote this method as 'remaking' of known problems by either one of the other two methods mentioned above, or by combinations thereof. In fact, it is rather a form for inspiration instead of another composing technic.

Step by step (Retro-wise)

The method 'Step by step' consists of a backward movement from a certain final position towards the initial position of a new problem. So, during this backward movement the number of pieces increases. As it happens by retro-analysis, I think the name 'Retro-method' would better correspond to the character of this method. Diagrams 1-4 show the development of a 7x7 miniature from a simple opposition motif.



The thematic final at **diagram 1 is the opposition 27=48** with black to move. How to arrange this into a miniature is the start of our search. As black is to move, white must have made a move to obtain the position of diagram 1. A previous non-capture move of white is impossible, so white should have executed a shot or stroke. One of the possibilities is 50x39x48, requiring black pieces on squares 43 and 44. These pieces, being under the capture of white piece 50, form, according to A. Kovrizhkine, an 'Under-taking range'. To realize the move 50x39x48 over the black piece 44, white may simply offer its piece on square 45 through 50-40(35x44) etc., but that's a rather dull routine-like action.

So, let us consider the possibility to offer a white king instead of a white piece on square 45, as a king's offer will enrich the course of the problem (of course, without a king in the initial position). Now, white has to bring a king on square 40, what is not always that easy to accomplish. In our case it is possible to bring the white king from square 1 through 1-40(35x44)50x48 etc. The white king can easily arrive on square 1 from

various positions, but in our case it will be convenient to apply the stroke 25x01. In this way, we come up with the initial position of **diagram 2: 39-34(48x30)25x1(32x43)1-40(35x44)50x48+**.

Clearly, the black king may have been arrived on 48 after the white piece offer by **47-42(37x48) in diagram 3**. Although this miniature completely corresponds to the rules for problems, the 6x7 initial position can possibly be further optimized.

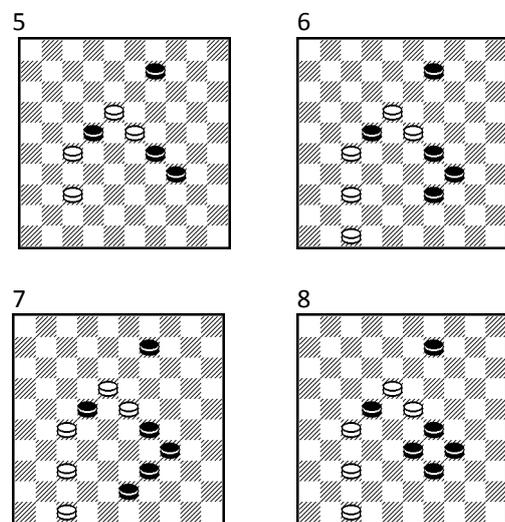
The author shouldn't look to it with emotional eyes, but by a cool sight from a distance. It's not always possible to make the right choice direct after finishing of a composition. Ancient wisdom teaches us: it's better to forget about the problem made for some time, in order to review it later-on with fresh eyes.

Following this wisdom, we'll see that not all aspects of the arrangement were that beautiful, like the colour unbalance 6x7. Thus, there is the possibility to extend the miniature with a white piece. But where to situate it? It seems that a good solution would be on square 17 with the black piece on 7 transferred to square 16, thus allowing the sequence 17-11(16x7)47-42 etc. However, now an interchange of white moves appears: as a first move one can choose between 47- 42 and 17-11. So, we have to search further.

The result desired is reached by introducing an economical two-stroke after white's first move. One can bring the black king from square 26 instead of 37 by adding a white piece on 36 and transferring the white piece from square 47 towards 42. The end result is the much better game-like 7x7 position of **diagram 4: 36-31(26x48)39-34(48x30)25x1(32x43)1-40(35x44)50x48+ 27=48** (Ukraine championship 1981).

Reconnaissance (Combi-wise)

The 'Reconnaissance' method, also often applied to the composition of problems, consists of the search of combinatorial schemes, without any understanding how the combinations will result into a sharp ending. Here, the composing work starts with the potential of an interesting combination, such as **diagram 5: 18-13(22x42)13x4(29x18)4x25/30+**.



At first instance, the position of **diagram 5** may only be useful as an illustration of the majority-rule. Nevertheless, some elements of a mechanism are seen, although not yet clear which one exactly. Two of them are: the contact of white pieces 18 and 23 with the black pieces as well as the perspective to use square 47 by a white piece for a capture-move. These two elements mark both the importance of contacts of white and black pieces and the attention of available squares as a base for capture-moves of white.

At this stage of the composing process the preliminary selection is to be done: should one, yes or no, continue to work on the silhouette of a possible future mechanism? Often, the decision depends upon the artistic aim, judgement, and willingness of the author to put enough effort in it. In other words, during the composing process, an author has to estimate the value of the elements found, as only the author himself is his own and first critic for what will be done or not. Let's go on, this time.

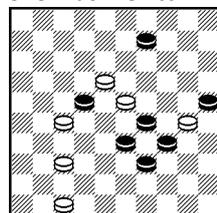
White could do a capture-move if a white piece is present on 47. This doesn't work, however, as in diagram 5 the white king has to take two

pieces. Is there a possible winning motif present by adding a black piece on square 39 (**diagram 6**)? Unfortunately, that leads to a draw. A similar, negative, result is obtained by adding a black piece on 43 to create a two-stroke by the white piece 47 (**diagram 7**). Unfortunately, after 18-13(22x42)13x4(29x18)47x49 there is no win: black plays subsequently (18-22)4x27/31/36(34-40)=.

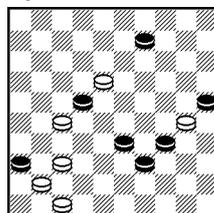
What will happen if we transfer the black piece 43 towards square 33? See **diagram 8**: 18-13(22x42)13x4(29x18)47x40(18-23)4-27(23-29)27-49(39-44)49-38(44x35)38x24/20/15(35-40)15-33(40-45)33-50+. The resulting endgame is economical but not sharp and cannot be recommended as a desired final for a miniature. It should be perfect, remains the goal.

So, we have to go back again to the issue of contact between black and white pieces. Let us now add a white piece on 30 and a black piece on 25, see **diagram 9**: 18-13(22x42)13x4(29x18) 47x40(25x45)4x50+ ("Krymskaya Pravda" 09.04.1980). By this, the thematic final 'blocking the black piece on square 45' is reached. We could have taken a rest now, if there was not the uneconomical two-stroke 25x45 by black. In spite of the fact that International rules does not consider it as a serious shortcoming, we should search for the applying of an 'economical' offer. Will our further search successful or will it not? Nobody knows, but the work has still to be continued.

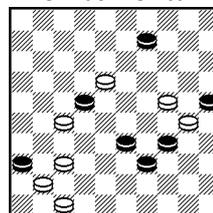
9 S. Yushkevitch



10



11 S. Yushkevitch



How to avoid the 'non-economical offer'? We need one white piece somewhere under black attack, when black makes the stroke 25x45. It's possible by adding both a black piece on 36 and a white piece on 41 as done in **diagram 10**: 18-13(22x42)47x40(25x45)13x4(36x47). We have solved the economic majority-capture, but what to do with the black king, that appears on square 47 at the end?

Let's take a time-out in order to see to where we came from? We have used as starting point the position of diagram 1, then we have achieved the miniature of diagram 9 and subsequently we have got some further ideas: applying the economic majority-rule as well as the spirit to win in the 'tric-trac' space. Combining those is, however, not possible, so, we have to reject something.

Let's keep the economic two-stroke that results in the black king on square 47. Let's forget the contact of white pieces 18 and 23 with black pieces, somewhat strange since we have been starting with this element, as shown in diagram 10, *i.e.* composing is seldom a straightforward process! This opens the addition of a white piece on square 24 that allows white to make his combination resulting in a black king on 47 as shown in **diagram 11**: 18-13(22x42)47x40(25x45)13x4(36x47)4-15(47x20)15x50+ ("Krymskaya Pravda" March 3, 1984).

Bingo! The 7x7 miniature of **diagram 11** eventually satisfies both artistic and technical requirements, *i.e.* an economical two-stroke and an equal number of black and white pieces.

Blankenaar (Piece-wise)

Cees Blankenaar preferably used the 'Reconnaissance' method in the composing process as can be read by this fragment from his 1910 Dutch article, cited above:

"Ik ga nooit voor het bord zitten of ik moet iets te vertellen hebben. Het maken van veel problemen acht ik een fout... Is het moeilijk iets nieuws te geven? Neen. De rijkdom van ons damspel waarborgt steeds nieuwe bronnen. Maar hoe komt men dan aan zoo'n idee? vraagt wellicht de belangstellende dammer.

Heel eenvoudig. Ik zet op mijn bord eenige stukken, onverschillig waar. Het eigenaardige, het mooie en toch diep-raadselachtige van ons spel is, dat, welken stand men ook opzet, een vraagstuk geboren is. Iedere achteloos

opgezette stelling verbergt een vraagstuk. Merkt de argelooze damspeler niets op, de oplettende voelt direct een geheim. Dit geheim zal ik trachten te ontsluiëren.

Ik heb dus nu zoo'n achteloos opgezette stelling voor mij. De kern, het beste van dien stand, breng ik door studie te voorschijn en dit uitwerkend begin ik nu langzaam op te bouwen. Plotseling ontdek ik een variant, die ik belangrijker acht dan de oorspronkelijke stelling. Deze laatste laat ik nu geheel los en werp mij op het nieuwe vraagstuk. Zoo gebeurt het wel, dat ik verscheidene malen van kern verander en dan ten slotte vasthoud die, welke mij het rijkste lijkt. Door studie heb ik nu een interessant gegeven verkregen, dat niet meer toevallig is. Nu begint het eigenlijke uitwerken: het weren van onverwachte winstgangen, die soms het geheele stuk bederven.

De eerste zet van een goed probleem moet reeds verborgen zijn; is dat niet het geval dan moet uit de reeks zetten het nuttelooze weggenomen worden. De winstgang mag ook niet door onbeteekenende zetten worden gerekt. Iedere komende zet moet als het ware een verrassing zijn voor den oplosser. Ik hecht eveneens aan een artistieke stand, d.w.z. het aanzicht van een stand moet prettig zijn. De ervaring heeft mij geleerd, dat die problemen het meest populair zijn, welke naast groote verborgenheid uitmunten door fraaien stand”.

It's a clear explanation of the method used by this problemist, generally recognized as the greatest endgame-composer in the draughts problem history. I only add some words to his thesis: *“I never seat at the board, if I have nothing to say”.*

To my opinion, Blankenaar advocated the general psycho-physical potential of a problemist, *i.e.* its energy that is present before composing a problem. If a problemist ‘has something to say’, he already must have an idea, independent of the composing method to be used. The early start of composing was defined by Blankenaar in a very simple way: *“I put on the board several pieces, without bordering where exactly”.* If such energetic potential is absent, a successful result of the composing process is hard to achieve, even if one spend many hours with board and pieces.

In conclusion, the method of draughts composing is not the aim. Moreover, the two methods – ‘Step by step’ and ‘Reconnaissance’ – may be often and easily interweaved. Some problemists like the ‘Step by step’ method, some others like the ‘Reconnaissance’ method. But each problemist should technically know how to apply both of them, separately or in combination: he will not really bother to which method the composing process relates. So, it does not matter through which process a problem is composed. It only does matter that a problem is original and attractive.

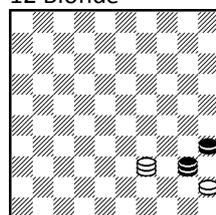
Variations (Vary-wise)

Now some words about an extra and important technical issue, which is wide-spread among problemists: to vary!

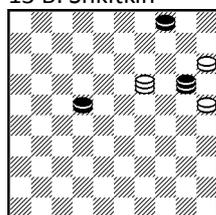
Diagram 12 shows the motive of Blónde, a famous French problemist of the XVIII century. White wins after any move of the black king, *i.e.* (40-29)39-34(29x40)45x34+ or (40-49)39-44(49x40)45x34+.

B. Shkitkin slightly changed the Blónde motive by transferring it to the upper side of the board, in which the motive has become an intermediate, as shown in **diagram 13**: (20-47A)19-24(47x20)25x14(22-28)14-9(4x13)15-10 (28-33)10-4+, A: (20-3)19-14(3x20)25x14(22-28)14-9(4x13)15-10(28-33)10-4+. This transferred motive became the base for the 7x7 miniature of **diagram 14**: **20-14(16x47)14x3(47x20)3x26x19 -> dia 13** (‘Shashki’, June 1979).

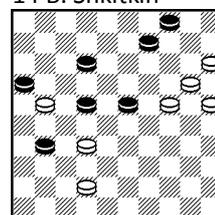
12 Blónde



13 B. Shkitkin



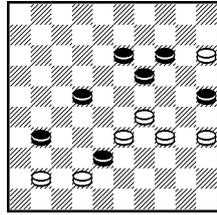
14 B. Shkitkin



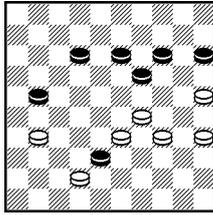
Four other examples of variation are taken from ‘Mir miniatures’, 1994. The first two show the variation towards only fragments of a certain mechanism. **Diagram 15**: **41-36(38x47)36x20(25x14)29-23(19x30)**

35x24(47x20)15x24+. The climax of the author's conception is the application of the majority-rule in the stroke 19x30. A slight change of the initial position brought about a slightly different result, shown in **diagram 16: 29-23(19x30)35x24(38x47)31-26(47x20)26x10(15x4)25x14+**. The next two examples demonstrate the possible transfer of the whole construction. **Diagram 17: 49-44(40x49)8-2(49x16)17-11(6x17)2-8(16x2)8x39(2x43)48x28+**. The transfer demonstrated in the following diagram is the so-called the 'Mirror's transfer' of diagram 17. **Diagram 18: 39-33(29x47)9-4(47x15)4-13(15x4)13x37(4x42)48x28+**.

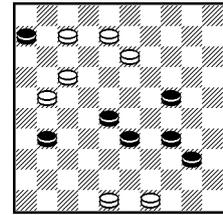
15 B. Shkitkin



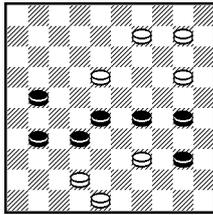
16 B. Shkitkin



17 V. Matus



18 V. Matus



Combined Variations (Mirror-wise)

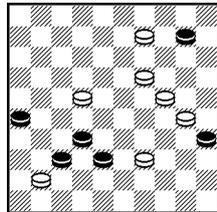
In the next three examples we see the so-called 'Mirror's transfer' together with a variation of the mechanistic parts.

Diagram 19: 39-33(38x20)9-4(35x13)4x21(26x28)41x23+ ('Shashki', October 1980).

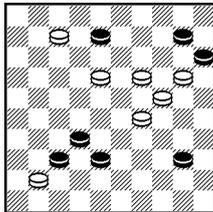
Diagram 20: 19-14(10x30)7-2(15x33)2x28(32x12)41x43(12-17)43-38(17-21)38-32(21-26)32-27+ ('Dambrete', August 1981).

Diagram 21: 17-11(16x18)22x4(33x31)4x20(25x23)44x33+ ('Dambrete', December 1979).

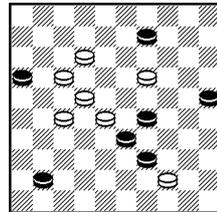
19 V. Matus



20 V. Matus



20 V. Matus



In conclusion, 'Variation' is a very fruitful way during the search for an optimal arrangement of the author's ideas. But there is also a serious warning. Be careful with variations of themes from problems of other authors, do not forget to stop before the borderline, over which something called 'plagiarism' begins!

Good luck everybody!





Epilogue Tom Kieboom

Perhaps I am, after my late reintegration, still a somewhat beginning problemist: I enjoyed the quiet 'step-by-step' treatment of composing draughts problems by Serge, a beautiful lecture 'draughts problems'. Hopefully, this inspires beginning problemists, may-be also our loyal solvers of Arne van Mourik's problem column, to composing new draughts problems. I have not seen or heard Serge on the piano, but am convinced that he plays the white and black keys as excellent as moving the white and black pieces on the draughts board!

Also your experiences of composing draughts problems are welcomed to share these with the readers of De Problemist. Send me an e-mail (ank.kieboom@inter.nl.net) or letter (Stationsweg 56, 2991 CM Barendrecht, The Netherlands) and I will make again something beautiful of it.



Serge Yushkevitch during a concert with his students Maria Obolenskaya (left) and Anastasia Popova (centre): the performance of 'Siquidille' from the opera Carmen of G. Bizet at the National University of Arts in Charkov on April 16, 2013. There is a youtube movie of this performance: youtube.com/watch?v=Pg8fHdgWV4&feature=youtu.be