How did composers of the common practice period decide which order to put chords in? Did they just throw them down on paper haphazardly?

As a matter of fact, there are certain chord progressions that appear more frequently, and there are others that are avoided pretty consistently. While the choices were always based on what sounded good to the composer, theorists can find a pattern in their choices that we can use to easily remember which chord progressions work and which ones don’t.

One way to understand this pattern is to think in terms of root movements. A root movement is the basic interval between the root of one chord and the root of the next chord. You don’t have to worry about the interval’s inflection, just its distance and direction.

For example, to determine the root movement here, we look at the root (not bass) of each chord and figure the interval between them. A to B is down a seventh, but since octaves don’t matter, we invert it to up a second.

So here’s the pattern: common practice period composers generally used root movements of up a second, down a third, and down a fifth!

Remember... since inflection doesn’t matter, we can ignore accidentals when we figure the root movements.

That’s not say that they never used other root movements, but it didn’t happen very often.

Sequences of chords that don’t follow this pattern are called retrogressions, and they are considered unstylistic.

“Unstylistic” is a polite way of saying “The composers didn’t do it so you shouldn’t do it either”!

There are also four simple exceptions to this pattern:

- Any chord can move to tonic.
- Tonic can move to any chord.
- Any chord can move to dominant.
- And the leading-note triad must move to tonic.

Let’s try it... say you have a supertonic chord and you are trying to decide what chord to use to follow it.

- You can move up a second to a mediant chord...
- You can move down a third to a leading-note chord...
- You can move down a fifth to a dominant chord...
- Or you can use the first exception and go to a tonic chord!