

Chords in second inversion

Chords in second inversion (with the fifth in the bass) are regarded as dissonances which must resolve because they include the note a fourth above the bass. They are sometimes called 'six-four chords' as they contain these intervals above the bass. In traditional harmony they can only be used a particular patterns which permit this resolution. Three common patterns are found:

1. The 'passing six-four' - found in the middle of a phrase.

I Vc Ib Ib Vc I IV Ic IVb IVb Ic IV

Here the second inversion chord arises by adding passing notes when a chord moves to its first inversion or back again. Note that all the parts can move by step, making a smooth and fluid progression.

2. The 'cadential six-four' - found at a cadence.

II Ib IIb Ic V Ic V I Ic V VI
Imperfect cadence Perfect cadence Interrupted cadence

Chord Ic often falls on a strong beat, resolving to V as part of a cadence. You will find this progression occasionally in Bach, but very frequently from Haydn onwards.

3. The 'auxiliary six-four' - IVc used as a decoration of chord I.

I VIIb Ib IV IV IVc I

Note the pattern I VIIb Ib, which is very similar to the passing six-four, but slightly gentler in effect.