



# Developing Black-Belt Choral Musicians: Transferable Lessons and Methods from Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

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Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) is a grappling martial art that is often used as a vehicle to impact practitioners positively, building resilience, patience, confidence, and discipline through terraced skill-building in a community of individuals from all walks of life. A form of submission grappling, it has been described as having many of the mental challenges of chess with physical consequences via pins, joint manipulation, and strangulation holds. It is an effective method of self-defense, a competitive sport, a hobby, and a lifestyle for many. The physical and mental benefits of this art form deserve our attention in the choral world. In this article, we will explore the unexpected lessons and methods from the jiu-jitsu mats and how they can be effectively transferred to the rehearsal room. As a black belt with over thirty years of martial arts experience, some of these

concepts come from the author's own experiences, and others have been adapted from a book by Renner Gracie titled, *The 32 Principles: Harnessing the Power of Jiu-Jitsu to Succeed in Business, Relationships, and Life*.<sup>1</sup>

## Connection

In order to effectively control an opponent, one must control distance. BJJ players must physically connect to their opponent and leave no space for movement or counter-attack until they are ready to move or elicit an expected movement from their opponent. It is also true that BJJ players often share a connected camaraderie. Having traversed through difficult training together, they share a bond with their training partners and mutually share aspects of their lives. Connection allows the "ability to communicate, listen, negotiate, observe, problem solve, escalate, deescalate, empathize, pacify, praise, embrace, or perhaps totally avoid [to help] maintain control in everyday social situations."<sup>2</sup>

Connection is the catalyst principle upon which all ensemble music learning occurs. After all, musicians must connect with each other first to effectively communicate with an audience. Additionally, think about how

important connection is for recruiting and retention of singer-musicians in ensembles. It is paramount to foster an environment that prioritizes connection. After all, ensemble members who are connected often play or sing much better together because they experience a form of creative symbiosis.

### Detachment

The principle of detachment conversely allows deliberate disconnection from an opponent. Even if momentarily, detachment creates opportunities to avoid stagnation, maintain advantage, or perhaps elicit a desired movement from an opponent toward attack or submission. This principle is applicable to rehearsals in knowing when to push musicians further and when to allow them to work independent of the director. It is important for singer-musicians to be equipped with skills, and then be given the latitude to develop independent and collective musicianship.

The jiu-jitsu mats are a place where mistakes are welcomed. The entire art form is built upon the premise of making mistakes. The “tap” is the BJJ player’s way of saying “I surrender.” Then, the two opponents slap hands to indicate readiness again, and they continue the roll (sparring). Afterward, they exchange ideas and ask questions, trying to discern their own mistakes or draw upon the knowledge of their opponent. Failure breeds success and falling short is an opportunity for growth. These are the lessons that BJJ teaches.

Choral directors sometimes default to minimizing mistakes. Allow singers space to make mistakes in a forgiving environment and identify the mistakes themselves whenever possible. Instead of telling them that they missed a rhythm, detach and ask leading questions that provide direction for ensemble members to discern their own mistakes. Experience is the greatest teacher, and directors must gently correct while not robbing singers of the opportunity to self-correct. Finally, detachment is relevant to letting go of the disciplined monotony related to musical skill building in rehearsals toward expressive communication in performance. Detachment is often called the flow-state in other realms and is important for internalization and ultimate enjoyment.

### Stability

A tripod always has a stable foundation with at least three points of contact. This principle is valuable in a fighting or combat scenario for balance while standing or while trying to maintain a dominant position once the fight progresses to the ground. This lesson transfers to the rehearsal room as directors attempt to equip singer-musicians with facility with their respective voices, music literacy, and repetitive intentional practice of literature. These three points of contact allow for stability amidst performance anxiety, distractions in concert, and the inevitability of something eventually going awry musically. Imagine the two sides of the ensemble somehow realize they are a measure apart momentarily because they misread a gesture or counted incorrectly. How will they react? With a stable foundation, they can rely on their practiced skills to quickly realize the error and take steps to rectify without the audience ever knowing.

### Method of Instruction

With few exceptions, jiu-jitsu academies across the world employ a similar approach to delivering instruction: learn it, drill it, troubleshoot it, apply it, repeat.

- *Learn it:* Players form a circle around the instructor, who will demonstrate the technique from the center of the mat.
- *Drill it:* Players break into pairs (upper belt with a lower belt) to drill the technique. The upper belt goes first to demonstrate proper execution. Then, assists the lower belt with terminology, positioning, body mechanics, and details. The instructor walks around to help individuals struggling with the technique.
- *Troubleshoot it:* Based on feedback and what the instructor saw while walking around during the drilling portion, the instructor re-circles the group oriented to the center mat and cleans up common mistakes and answers questions.
- *Apply it:* The latter half of the class is usually spent attempting to integrate techniques learned that day with

other known techniques in a live “roll” (sparring session), making synaptic connections, and chaining larger contextual movements with the “move of the day.”

- *Repeat:* Each technique is usually taught throughout the week at each training session. Purposeful repetition is imperative. The curriculum is cyclical, returning to key foundational concepts throughout the year and connecting to new concepts.

In the choral rehearsal room, this method is transferable by giving instruction and reading an initial pass as a group. Then, singers work independently or in small groups by section. The director keeps a watchful eye and walks around to see how they are doing, troubleshooting with them and making small adjustments. After a few minutes, singers reorient to the podium as they rehearse as a full ensemble again. Directors can provide feedback and allow opportunity to apply the techniques in a larger context by reconnecting the concepts to the repertoire. This allows ensemble musicians to connect the theoretical to the practical and apply it in rehearsal with stream of consciousness within a larger section or the whole piece. Returning to the independent/small group drilling portion may be necessary. Concepts can be repeated in new ways each day but with mindful return to the passage or piece of music.

### **Ratcheting**

Whether in BJJ, fitness, a novel reading challenge, developing a savings account, or in the music rehearsal room, the ratchet principle applies. As Renner Gracie and Paul Volponi say, “Small, persistent advancements will add up to significant gains over time.”<sup>3</sup> BJJ can be very dynamic and fast moving. However, it is also said that BJJ is an art of inches. This applies to the techniques themselves—by advancing superior positioning little bits at a time to place oneself in an advantageous scenario to pursue submission from the opponent. It also is relevant to the advancement in rank, which is discussed in a later section of this article. High-level musicianship, building large programs with multiple ensembles, or achieving superior ratings at festival does

not happen overnight.

Macro advancements do not occur without the necessary daily, persistent, disciplined micro advancements. Therefore, be certain to allot a few minutes of time in every rehearsal for sight-reading, music literacy, and pedagogy. It only takes the short, focused effort in each rehearsal to yield grand results in the long term. Additionally, encourage musicians to embrace short-term discomfort in digestible bits toward security and ease in performance. No growth occurs without challenge and adversity. If progress stagnates, return to a previous stage of the music-learning hierarchy and ratchet back up. Repetitive daily actions ratcheted means freedom to enjoy performances without stress. Singers have prepared with intention repetitively so that the performance is just a display of their small, but meaningful, progress.

### **Cross-Training and Seminars**

In BJJ, each person has a uniquely different training style and a different “game” that they are developing. Dropping in at different academies intentionally at the local level or while traveling allows the BJJ player to absorb a different methodology or teaching style, and the opportunity to meld it with their own style. Even if there is only a single take-away, it is valuable to the journey, as it provides context and another tool for the “bag of tricks.” Directors should actively seek opportunities to drop into other rehearsal rooms to source new teachers, veteran teachers, large ensembles, small ensembles, and groups with completely different cultures.

Exposing the entire ensemble to another ensemble’s rehearsal lends additional perspective. Learning concepts from other musical or performance areas (band, orchestra, music theater, dance, etc.) will equip the ensemble with new and innovative techniques for immediate implementation. Likewise, seminars from experts brought in to lead instruction are valuable. Exposing singer-musicians to alternative methods of instructional delivery at all levels of preparation can often shorten the learning curve.



### The Grandmaster Principle

The journey in jiu-jitsu is a long one. On average, it takes a BJJ player ten years to achieve the rank of black belt—much longer than most traditional martial arts. All associations have slightly different criteria, but there is a standard from the International Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Federation. It is usually predicated on time in rank, proficient display of skills/technique, and character with possession of a moral compass. The adult belt ranks in BJJ are white, blue, purple, brown, and black. Each belt has the opportunity to earn four stripes at every rank until black belt as a way to measure progress through the rank. At black belt, there are six degrees. These benchmarks provide a support system with those to look up to and those to bring up in their own respective journey, easily identifiable by the belts. It also provides teaching opportunities.

After skills are acquired, upper belts are often offered opportunities to pass on knowledge to lower belts (perhaps with some far-away oversight). It develops resilience and patience. Ranking up in BJJ is not guaranteed. It is only through persistence and recognized self-improvement that one is considered for a level change. It is always amazing to see grown adults get excited over a little piece of white tape placed on the black bar of their belt for the stripe. Even adults are not so different from kindergartners. Everyone likes that “gold star” of recognition that signifies progress in effort and goals.

Many choral directors employ a council of ensemble officers or chair positions, but that usually only accounts for a small portion of the roster. Directors should consider a ranking system for the entirety of their ensembles. Perhaps it is simply pairing mentors with mentees or perhaps it is a visible sticker on their folders. It can identify higher ranking individuals as someone to approach for help and direction.

White belts training with other white belts is where most injuries occur in jiu-jitsu. Pairing upper belts with lower belts allows for learning to occur proficiently and efficiently. The same can be true in choral ensembles. When done properly, the ranking system develops a strong sense of community with encouragement across the ranks. Students who level up to the next rank are applauded by their classmates, moving up in formation

for commencement and conclusion of class. It creates a healthy sense of camaraderie and competition, inculcating a “never give up” attitude. Advancement in rank also comes with added responsibility, so it is important to hold upper levels to a standard of expectation commensurate with the rank.

Once one achieves the rank of black belt, the journey is not over. It is just the beginning. This is the point where one realizes that there is always more to learn by utilizing the grandmaster principle—i.e., “living with the confidence of a black belt, while learning with the humility of a white belt.”

### Conclusion

In the end, the two art forms of jiu-jitsu and choral music making are not too far apart. Both develop creativity, community, and focused skill-building—all basic tenets of prosperous humanity. There are valuable cross-discipline lessons in instructional delivery, but also anecdotal reminders of connection, detachment, stability, advancement, and motivation present in both art forms. Lastly, it is important to keep the play in the work and make it enjoyable for directors and singers. Both jiu-jitsu players and musicians typically come to their respective art forms because it is fun, and it should be. Play on, sing on. **CT**

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rener Gracie and Paul Volponi, *The 32 Principles: Harnessing the Power of Jiu-Jitsu to Succeed in Business, Relationships, and Life* (BenBella Books, Inc., 2023), eBook.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.