

## Entertainment

### Music fills the silence

Burbank composer will add emotion through tunes during screening of Buster Keaton film.

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Michael Mortilla keeps a lot of silent film lore tucked up his sleeve. It comes in handy when he's accompanying the silent flicks on the keyboard for special screenings.

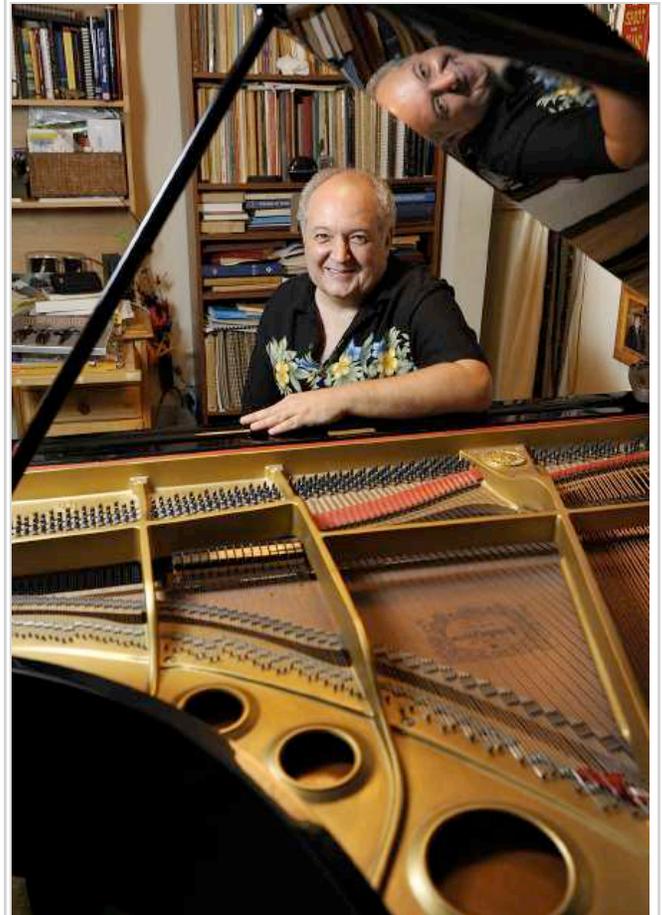
In the early 1920s, film audiences watched the action on screen without dialogue or sound effects. A pianist played music to match the emotions the actors were feeling, Mortilla said. The practice continued until the first talkie — "The Jazz Singer" — was released in 1927.

"In small cities, the piano accompanists were women because men were working," the Burbank resident said.

Preservation of the films wasn't a priority, he added, and many films were destroyed in the early days because of the value of the silver nitrate.

"The films weren't considered valuable in the day," Mortilla said. "They would take film and burn it because it was made of silver nitrate, and when it burned away, they would retrieve the silver because it had value. The films didn't."

These facts and stories about the actors of the silent era will be revealed by Mortilla when he performs keyboard accompaniment for the screening of "Steamboat Bill, Jr." starring Buster Keaton at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Burbank Central Library.



Michael Mortilla is a film keyboardist and composer for silent and sound films. (Scott Smeltzer/News-Press)

Mortilla accompanies silent film screenings throughout the nation. What makes his performances different from others is he composes the music during each performance, he said.

"I never know what I'm going to play before I sit down at the piano," Mortilla said.

He has always wanted to bring a program to Burbank and finally approached library assistant Louise Paziak with the idea, Paziak said.

"I went to a screening of a Mary Pickford film at the Alex Theatre several months ago and I found there was quite a bit of interest in silent films," she said. "They are also universally accessible."

Paziak has never seen "Steamboat Bill, Jr.," but she said she's looking forward to it.

Other people must be too, she added, because the fliers promoting the show have disappeared.

Mortilla believes more than 100,000 films still exist, but that represents only about 10% to 13% of silent films ever made. He's seen scripts and still photographs of films that have become lost, he said.

"The iconic image of Thede Bara in the film 'Cleopatra' is one in particular," he said. "It's a lost film. No copy of it exists, but maybe one day one will surface."

Silent-film canisters have also been unearthed when buildings have been razed, Mortilla added.

"They took the film in the canisters and put them in landfills or used them for filler for swimming pools or buildings," he said. "But by burying them, they preserved it."

The Library of Congress keeps its film libraries in vaults set at freezing temperatures because the nitrate is flammable at higher temperatures, he said.

Mortilla has been working as a professional composer since 1976.

He started writing music for live theater. He worked with dance pioneer Martha Graham, composing music for choreography and dance classes when she was training dancers.

"That's where I learned to accompany movement," he said. "Jumping is difficult. There's so much time that physics allows one to land. With films, one has to stay with the story, so you are always watching."

In 1986, Mortilla was asked to join the faculty at UC Santa Barbara and eventually composed 150 pieces over a 14-year period, he said.

To supplement his income, he started tuning pianos and through one of his clients got a gig playing for the Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

"It just so happened it was the first time they did a silent film and needed a musician," he said. "I never made the connection I could do that."

Randy Haberkamp, director of educational programs and special projects for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts And Sciences, heard him play.

Mortilla helped Haberkamp by suggesting the type of electronic equipment to produce outdoor screenings at the Paramount Ranch in Agoura.

They've done silent-film programs in San Francisco, the Motion Picture Country Home in Woodland Hills, the National Archives and Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and Academy Motion Pictures Arts And Sciences in New York, Haberkamp said.

Mortilla's expertise is that he puts the film first ahead of his musical accompaniment, Haberkamp said.

"He's very playful," he said. "But also I think it's about what the film is. His music brings out from the film things a viewer might not notice because he's working with the film to highlight what's going on on screen."