

Creating Sounds For Silents Michael Mortilla composes music for Chaplin on video

Mick LaSalle, Chronicle Staff Critic
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Michael Mortilla is a silent film accompanist and composer best known to Bay Area audiences for his appearances with the Silent Film Festival. His accompaniment of films such as Mary Pickford's "Poor Little Rich Girl" (1917) and Monta Bell's "Upstage" (1926) have brought out the emotional complexity of these cinematic masterpieces.

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Now Mortilla, who is based in Santa Barbara, has turned his attention to Charlie Chaplin. "The Chaplin Mutuels," a three-volume set of shorts the silent-screen comedian made for the Mutual company, has been released by Kino, with scores composed and played by Mortilla.

Each video contains four shorts -- among them the most well-known and highly regarded of Chaplin's two-reelers, such as "The Rink," "The Pawn Shop" and "The Immigrant." Together they represent the best edition of these Chaplin shorts currently on the market.

It took more than a year for Mortilla, 44, to compose and arrange the scores. For a silent accompanist, the process begins with a videotape of the film -- without music. "I watch it three or four times straight

through without any kind of playing," says Mortilla, speaking by phone. "Then I begin improvising. I break the film down, scene by scene. The trick is to write music that actually fits the individual scenes."

When music works, it seems inevitable. Yet the finished product is the result of many individual decisions. For every moment, a composer has to decide whether the audience should watch a scene from the perspective of the character onscreen, the narrator or the audience. "The most important thing a composer does is decide what is the psychological perspective of the music," he says.

For example, in "Easy Street" there's a scene in which Chaplin is feeding starving street kids. "I put happy, carefree music under that," says Mortilla, "which really went with the mood of what he was doing -- he's feeding them like they're animals. The temptation is to put sad music underneath, because it's poor kids. But you want to avoid telling audiences what they're supposed to feel."

Mortilla first became interested in silent film as a teenager on Long Island. "I would watch silents on PBS, and I thought they were the coolest thing I'd ever seen." Only later did he become a pianist. "I was largely self-taught," Mortilla says. "But I read

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biographies of composers, and I noticed that all the great composers had the ability to improvise, so I made that the emphasis of my self-training."

Mortilla got so good at improvising that he became the pianist for Martha Graham's dance troupe in New York. "Martha made me listen to modern music. She pushed me into the 20th century," he says. "As a result of my work with her, I became hypersensitive to nuance and movement. Later, when I started doing silent movies, I found it was just as easy as accompanying a modern dance class."

Mortilla accompanied his first silent film in 1986, after moving to California to teach music for dance at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Since then he has become, along with Dennis James, Robert Israel and a handful of others, one of the most respected and sought after accompanists in the business.

"What I love about Michael's playing is that he can really make you feel something," says Melissa Chittick, executive director of the San Francisco Silent Film Festival. "He took 'Upstage' and made it funny and touching. He brought out all the layers."

"It's the job of the accompanist to add the texture," says Mortilla, "In a way, I feel like I'm providing the dialogue. Very often you can take the words of the title that just flashed onscreen and sing them as lyrics to the next phrases I play. I find that thinking conversationally is better for me than thinking in abstract musical terms."

Of course, the very fact that Mortilla is able to do that speaks to the breadth of his musicianship. He plays approximately 30 shows a year and a full third of the time he plays for films he hasn't even seen. "Once I accompanied a movie where it seemed as though the heroine dies," he says, "and then suddenly she was walking onto the screen. I had to go immediately from really sad to really happy. 'Oh, my God,' I thought. 'Time to modulate the C major.'"

So far, Mortilla has no appearances in San Francisco this year -- the schedule for July's Silent Film Festival has yet to be announced. But his sensitive attention to detail and intention is there to be experienced on "The Chaplin Mutuals." Even better, anyone planning to be in Santa Barbara at 7 tonight can hear him at UC Santa Barbara's Campbell Hall. The program: Fritz Lang's "Metropolis."

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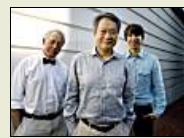
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