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An Interview with Silent Film Composer Michael Mortilla



Michael Mortilla, is one of the more welcoming presences to find at the *San Francisco Silent Film Festival*. He's been entertaining us for years with his compositions, and he can do it all (baroque, classical, farcical) when it comes to silent film accompaniment.

His reputation speaks for itself. Apart from working with both the UCLA Film and Television Archive and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, he's currently working on a project of silent film scores for the Chicago Symphony that will be premiered later this year.

This year he played for a few Laurel and Hardy shorts, a rediscovered John Ford western *Bucking Broadway*, and messaged the ivories for a Mary Pickford classic *Sparrows*. Here's TCM's exclusive interview with Michael Mortilla: [br>](#)

TCM: You're obviously a talented musician, but how does working on silent films open you up as an artist for other projects?

Mortilla: My other projects have opened me up as an artist in silent films. I am first and foremost a theater and dance composer, having worked for many years as a collaborator in those areas. Martha Graham and I worked closely for 7 years and it is she who trained me in connecting music to movement and gesture while incorporating story telling, emotion, theatrical effects and focused intent. I also trained under a few very fine directors and treat every collaborative effort as unique and a learning experience. In effect, I approach every project as theater and story-telling, which I believe all art is in the end.

TCM: You've been working with this festival for a few years now. What would you say are the virtues?

Mortilla: I do think that the people running the festival have their virtues in how they implement the business decisions. The San Francisco Festival organizers bring a great love of the art of silent film to their work and approach the implementation with great integrity and humanity. So I guess the greatest "virtue" of this particular festival is the people who organize it.

TCM: Please tell us about your influences for film scoring/accompaniment?

Mortilla: Not to sound too new age or overly philosophical, virtually everything I experience influences my music in any project. For my current scores with the Chicago Symphony, I found inspiration in a score I wrote in 1977 for an old time melodrama and another score I wrote last year for a student film at the LA Film School. These were essentially "throw off" kinds of scores in their original versions in that many would probably not see the projects. The melodrama was my first real attempt at writing for theater, but 30 after conception, developing a simple piano melody into a work for 106 of the countries top orchestral musicians was really quite a joy and something of a validation for me personally.

I am also very influenced by the music of others that I play and hear. The usual gang (Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, et al) but also composers like Arnold Bax, George Crumb, Ian Anderson (Jethro Tull), Led Zeppelin, Lead Belly, Oscar Peterson and many others. What I am not influenced by is how other film composers score films. In a sense, I am not even interested in how I have scored films in the past. Getting back to your first question, every film, every dance, every theater work and comedy sketch is a different story. Why tell that story with the same emotional context? The human mind has an extraordinary range of imagination. Limiting it to what has been done in the past (re-makes, if you will) is perhaps the greatest offense to an audience (after shoddy craftsmanship and laziness). My greatest influence can be summed up in two words: "What if...?"

TCM: What's the process involved when you have to create a score for these silents? How far in advance do you get a copy of the film?

Mortilla: For live piano, sometimes the process is a matter of sitting down at the piano in front of an audience and watching the film for the first time as they do. Even if you get to preview the film, often the prints on screen don't match the preview material. My solo work is 99% improvised and 1% filling a mold for certain kinds of scenes (opening credits, etc.) But even then, I NEVER play the same thing twice in a solo piano performance for a silent film, even if I have scored the work commercially.

For commercial releases, I generally watch the entire film in silence a few times to get a sense of the mood and story being told. Then I will go scene by scene to try different things. I usually write three or four versions of every scene by the time the project is over. Sometimes because I don't like the first versions, sometimes because the director doesn't like where I am going. However, I ALWAYS defer to the director in the end (although I will certainly defend my choices). Ultimately, art is a dictatorship and there can only be one voice. The best directors are open to all possibilities, but remain focused on ALL elements. Even when a less experienced director makes a suggestion, I will attempt to implement their vision to the best of my abilities (that goes for theater and dance as well). Music is there to serve the story, not the other way around. And while I am also telling a story, my role as a composer is to enhance, not dictate, what is being said. I may not agree, but again, if I am doing my job correctly I will be a cooperative collaborator. Besides, I can always write a Suite after I'm done and put in the missing sections - the "Composer's Cut" if you will.

Sometimes, I don't get the films in advance. If I do, lead-time varies. The first time I see a feature like "Sparrows" might be on a flat bed the afternoon of the screening. I might also get a DVD of VHS months ahead of time.

TCM: Apart from having considerable creative control, what is another advantage of providing solo accompaniment to these pieces, as opposed to working with a group of musicians?

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Mortilla: The obvious financial advantage is built in: two musicians are twice as expensive (maybe more than twice since a score has to be written, rehearsals need to be paid for, etc). I actually prefer working with other musicians, but that doesn't always jive with the presenter's budget. That being said, the other thing that I do like about solo accompaniment for silent film is that I sometimes get ideas in the middle of a film and can simply implement to the new idea on the spot. I played for a screening of Mary Pickford's "Behind the Scenes" last month at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences and previewed the film on a flat bed the day of the screening. I had no idea what was happening in the film on first viewing. Then, in performance, I suddenly realized it was a love story and about relationships. (Duh!) I shifted the music to accommodate that idea and it seemed to work. That kind of spontaneous inspiration just isn't possible with a written score.

TCM: My favorite score at this year's festival was for "Bucking Broadway." I loved the galloping pace to the climax; it perfectly captured the jauntiness of John Ford at his lighthearted best. What was the inspiration for that particular piece?

Mortilla: Horses galloping down Broadway... I had the hardest time with that score and I'm not sure why (especially the finale). There is a fine line I try to draw in performing scores for silent film. They have to fit the film and at the same time be entertaining in their own right. Bravura and sensitivity: they aren't always complimentary to each other, especially in a cowboy chase scene! But if you think of a finale to a Beethoven sonata, you realize it is possible to have both. It requires yards of technique, miles of imagination, unending stamina and the ability to build the pace quite precisely, not peaking too soon or too late.

TCM: You had to improvise the Stan Laurel home movie. How does that process work for you? In your mind, have you done this enough to where you have the equivalent of stock music in your head?

Mortilla: Well I certainly do have a lot of scores stored in my brain and can call upon the Classical repertory if need be, as well as a lot of jazz, ancient music, modern music, my own music and improvised music. For that particular film, I chose a waltz from the 1977 melodrama I mentioned earlier. For one, it is a sweet piece and fairly relaxed. The screening was also being videotaped (I don't usually allow that) and the waltz was copyright back in 1977. So in a sense, I was also protecting myself legally.

Everything I play for solo piano in silent film is improvised (that is not usually the case in theater and dance by the way). I have a repertoire of "emotions" that I use, but not usually a repertoire of notes to fit them. Again, every score is unique and if I play the same film three times, you will hear three entirely different scores. Sort of like what I did for the 'Angel' outtakes from "Sparrows," if you saw that program.

TCM: What films over the years have given you the biggest headaches?

Mortilla: They all pose different challenges. Silent films without action are perhaps the hardest to play for on one level. It forces me to dig deep into my own mind and heart for "answers" to the challenges of "what are these people thinking?" Then again, "all slapstick" films can be equally as difficult as the pace sometimes never lets up. Play all high-energy music and you're doomed. There needs to be a rise and fall, even in the greatest battle scenes. Sort of the "little stories" of the participants, in a way.

I think the most difficult films were probably "By The Law" (Po Zakono) due to some very long scenes of things like water flowing, "People on Sunday" owing to a near lack of any kind of story line, and "Intolerance" because of the length and jumping back and forth between centuries. But again, these are unique stories and while they were difficult, I really enjoyed the challenge.

TCM: Any genre you like in particular? (i.e. Screwball farces vs. German Expressionism?)

Mortilla: I just like a good story, really. I can sink my teeth into the Houdini "Master Mystery" serials as much as something like "7th Heaven" or Keaton's "One Week" and get just as inspired. But my personal favorites are the films that go deep into the human condition and reveal "us" to ourselves. It is more "entertaining" for me to see a love story work out than to see someone get their butt kicked, and I love to get to the point where I am in tears at the piano. It can be a little embarrassing during a curtain call... but I usually recover by the end credit roll.

TCM: Will we see you next year? If so, why?

Mortilla: I certainly hope so. For one, I love playing the Castro and to a full house. As a conductor once said to me just before going on as piano soloist at the '95 Olympics: "just don't play any wrong notes." It is that kind of pressure in live performance that I find most exciting. Again, it is a very rewarding and validating experience and essentially what any creative and performing artist strives for: an audience!

There are a few other things I like as well with the San Francisco Silent Film Festival. The programming, the other accompanists (especially Clark Wilson), the staff and the board members. Hooking up with people like David Shepard, Michael Mashon, Christel Schmidt, Peter Lumberg, Pat Loughney, and Mona Nagai. But ultimately, it is the audience and their true love and appreciation for what is being presented that fuels the festival and the excitement. They are one of the warmest, friendliest and most welcoming audiences I have ever played for.

Oh, and the Sushi near my hotel is just great!

For more information about Michael Mortilla, visit his web site at <http://www.MusicMMan.com>

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