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FILM FEATURE

CINEMA PIANO

Michael Mortilla Accompanies the Classics

by D.J. Palladino

About once a year, Michael Mortilla (pictured) climbs up on stage at Campbell Hall and plays piano to a movie. If that sounds more like a serenade than the score for a silent film, it's because Mortilla does not usually play or make compositions to accompany films. He prefers improvising to silent films, and sometimes with next to no preparation.

"Usually I've seen it," he said, admitting he was about to go out to get a video copy of *Wings*, the 1927 film with Clara Bow and a very young Gary Cooper, in preparation for the screening he will accompany next Wednesday night. "But there were a few times when I couldn't see the film, when all I had to go on were the intertitles—you know, I get them off the Internet. And that's all the preparation I'd get." In other words, he would suss the arc of a film by consulting film-scholarly notes of the subtitles. Even then, he has been fooled, guessing a story would end badly, then suddenly watching the film take a turn for the joyous, leaving Mortilla with the scary task of suddenly assembling an array of happy notes to underscore the screen joy.

You might assume the spontaneity would create a vacuum of performance anxiety. "No; I can safely say I've never had stage fright," said Mortilla, speaking from his home in Burbank. "In fact, it makes me more nervous talking to you than getting up on stage," he said.

Wings was the first film to win an Academy Award in 1929, and Mortilla has had his share of Hollywood glamour, too, in a performance career that included playing before the Academy nomination luncheon, and onstage at the Atlanta Olympics. More recently he's played for UCLA's series of restored prints. "I'm the accompanist of choice and I'm flattered," said Mortilla, who recently accompanied a private screening of new prints shown to film critic Kenneth Turan.

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Interestingly, Mortilla began musical life as a rock drummer in 1970s Manhattan, sharing a bass player with Billy Joel. His piano conversion was quickly followed by work with the great (former Santa Barbaran) Martha Graham as a musician to dancers, which is where he met his wife Beth Burleson. Both came to UCSB in the early 1990s, but Mortilla left after a labor dispute. Today they live in L.A., where Burleson teaches second grade and Mortilla has been composing and respectfully riffing the pre-sound flickers.

Unlike others similarly employed, like the Alloy or the famed Clubfoot orchestras, Mortilla prefers to play second fiddle, so to speak, to the images. “The film and the music shouldn’t compete,” he said, citing other performers who continue playing after the film has ended in an obvious ploy to win separate applause for themselves. Mortilla never does that. “It’s a collaboration, no less, no more. I never doubt that the audience is there to experience the film and I’m there to illuminate the mood.”