

At the Hotel Bel-Air, a pianist's elegance and ivory



Pianist Antonio Castillo de la Gala in the Champagne Bar at the Hotel Bel-Air bar. For 12 1/2 years, he has entertained patrons with classic songs rendered in a style rich in embellishment and filigree. Tuesday night will be his last; along with about 220 other employees, he is losing his job. No matter. He's expecting a crowd.

(Christina House / For The Times)

By Martha Groves

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The Champagne Bar at the Hotel Bel-Air is dark as a lair. Ice clinks as men and women on caramel-colored leather chairs and forest-green couches imbibe, converse and laugh. A roaring fire blasts light and warmth, which is welcome, despite the heat of a late-summer evening, because the air-conditioned room feels like an ice bucket.

Against a wall, under giant paintings of swans, Antonio Castillo de la Gala -- dapper in a dark suit, striped tie and crisp shirt -- surveys his domain from his perch at a Yamaha baby grand piano. As his hands caress the keys, his bespectacled eyes roam the dark-paneled bar and he nods at the many familiar faces.

Five nights a week for 12 1/2 years, Castillo de la Gala has entertained patrons with classic songs rendered in a style rich in embellishment and filigree.

Think “As Time Goes By,” “Someone to Watch Over Me,” “The Man I Love.” Think Gershwin, Porter, Kern, tangos, Broadway, movies -- all elevated by masterly keyboard technique. This is music to fall in love by, and Castillo de la Gala did. (The hotel provided the swans and a gazebo, but that’s getting ahead of the story.)

The lounges of top-tier hotels are a distinct musical niche, a rarefied, murmurous, dimly lit world in which Castillo de la Gala is a highly polished fixture, even a minor legend.

With a 2,000-song repertoire committed to memory, he has amassed a fan base of philanthropists, captains of industry, kings, queens, movie stars and fellow musicians.

Given the venue, it is no surprise that celebrities, musical and otherwise, are frequently in the audience. Castillo de la Gala recites their names with relish; a robust self-regard, tempered by droll self-deprecation, is part of his charm. He has played duets with Phyllis Diller and Billy Joel. Paul McCartney stopped by once and, the pianist reports, was wowed by his arrangement of “Eleanor Rigby.”

When Robert Goulet showed up one night, Castillo de la Gala launched into “The Impossible Dream,” and Goulet sang along. A few months before his death, the pianist said, Michael Jackson applauded quietly after every song.

“For a boy from Veracruz to come to this country and mingle with such people, it’s an amazing life,” Castillo de la Gala said.

Tonight, the boy from Veracruz ends his run at the Bel-Air, which is closing for a renovation expected to last two years. Along with about 220 other employees, Castillo de la Gala is losing his job.

No matter. He's expecting a crowd.

"It's going to be insane," he said. "Everybody and their mother will be coming. It's going to be a logistics problem for the hotel. Thank God it's not my problem!"

In 1946, the year Castillo de la Gala was born in Mexico, entrepreneur Joseph Drown opened the Hotel Bel-Air on a wooded site acquired from Alphonzo E. Bell's Bel-Air Estates.

The pink-stuccoed Mission-style landmark became a lush hideaway for the upper crust of Hollywood and politics. It was where Grace Kelly slumbered after winning the best actress Oscar for "The Country Girl" and where Marilyn Monroe posed sultrily by the diving board in a strapless bathing suit. Where Elizabeth Taylor briefly lived with husband No. 1, Nicky Hilton. Where Richard Nixon wrote his memoirs (in Room 138) and where Nancy Reagan still dines regularly on the terrace.

But at 63, the five-star Bel-Air, on 12 acres in a canyon north of Sunset Boulevard, is showing its wrinkles. The 91 rooms "are getting tired and do need refurbishing," said general manager Tim Lee. And there's that matter of technology; 99% of guests, Lee said, cannot use their cellphones at the hotel.

Castillo de la Gala had hoped that he and his fiancée, Kathryn Tran, would marry at the hotel next year, but now they must make other plans. Two years ago, Tran was in the audience and requested several classical pieces: Rachmaninoff, Pachelbel, Puccini's "O Mio Babbino Caro." On the way out, she asked for his business card. Not long after, he proposed to her in the gazebo next to the hotel's famed Swan Lake.

One evening in early September, Castillo de la Gala warms up with the theme from "Love Story" and "The Music of the Night" from "Phantom of the Opera." The pianist, who does his own arrangements, adorns each selection with arpeggios and scales and ends with a flourish, lifting his hands off the keys or running a thumb along the keyboard.

Castillo de la Gala enjoyed a brief career as a concert pianist in Mexico and the United States. His last performance as a soloist with an orchestra was in Tucson in the 1980s, when he performed Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3.

His website (www.antoniocastillodelagala.com) indulges in florid language about his place “as an heir to the Liszt legacy.” That’s a bit like a novelist comparing himself to Tolstoy. Castillo de la Gala said that particular passage was written by someone else and that he is “much more modest.”

His biographical material boasts of a degree in concert piano in 1976 from the National Conservatory of Music in Mexico City, where he later taught. He says he studied with Angelica Morales von Sauer, wife of piano virtuoso Emil von Sauer, Liszt’s last pupil, as well as other masters.

He has performed, as recently as last year, in private homes and at consulates for the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s International Committee. After playing at a Christmas concert a few years ago at the Liberace Foundation in Las Vegas, he and a gold-laméd Santa drove across a parking lot in a mirror-tile-adorned Volkswagen with a Rolls-Royce grille to light the holiday tree.

In 2002, he began a one-man show, featuring his talents as a musician, quipster and storyteller, that he takes to private homes and parties. Longtime bar patrons have become his angels, hiring him to perform at their homes and elsewhere.

“He’s a one-man piano player who sounds like an orchestra,” said Donald Tallarico, a jeweler who lives in Bel-Air and goes to hear the pianist several times a week. “If anyone else were playing, it’d be just a song. With him, it’s a symphony.”

Tallarico has known the musician since he played at the Beverly Hills Hotel in the 1980s and early ‘90s before it closed for renovation in 1992. (“Max Factor and I were the last to leave the Polo Lounge,” Castillo de la Gala said.) Tallarico followed the music to L’Orangerie and then the Bel-Air.

Castillo de la Gala’s grandmother began teaching him to play when he was 3. His father, an itinerant salesman, actor and ballroom dancer, never made much money but had a passion for books. “I had one of those ideal childhoods, with no car, no TV, no phone,” Castillo de la Gala said.

But he had music. He performed on radio at age 5 and gave a solo recital the next year. Years later, he said, he took first prize in a Chopin competition in Mexico.

Performing in Puerto Vallarta years ago, he was peppered with song requests by two American tourists. Later, they offered to sponsor him as an immigrant to the U.S. so that he could play for patrons at their Tucson restaurant.

Once in the United States, he picked up idiomatic English by watching Woody Allen movies. He became a citizen about 10 years ago.

His work is his passion. He's not good at remembering names, he said, but knows people by the songs they request. That goes even for the guy who asked him to perform Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto. "I play the piano," Castillo de la Gala deadpanned.

Someone once asked for the Israeli national anthem, "and I knew it," he said. He is not above the occasional put-down. When a customer inquired whether he played mariachi music, he replied: "Look at my outfit. Do you see a mustache, a sombrero and a serape over my shoulder?"

In addition to playing selections by Beethoven, John Lennon and Ennio Morricone, the pianist composes songs with unabashedly romantic titles such as "First Love" and "Illusions of Love."

Music "just flows out of him," said Valerie Sobel, a philanthropist and longtime friend and patron. "He is. . . all charm and talent and good will."

Sobel has heard Castillo de la Gala "maybe 100 times" at the Champagne Bar. Soon, she will be moving along with the maestro.

Come Oct. 6, the pianist will be appearing at the Peninsula Hotel in Beverly Hills. His reputation precedes him. A spokeswoman for the luxury hotel says it will adjust the seating and menu in its Living Room "to accommodate Antonio and his many fans." He will play in the Club Bar Tuesday and Wednesday nights and in the Living Room Thursdays through Saturdays.

In his wildest dreams, Castillo de la Gala said, he could not have imagined his musical path. "My life is doing music. It's a dream life."

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