ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

Robbie Elfman's symphony begins with a somber picture of the death camps, but ends with a joyful reflection of Israel.

Music Will Tell Them

■ **Composers:** At 17, a USC student was moved to write a symphony in honor of Holocaust victims. It will be performed this weekend.

By BOB POOL
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His eye is trained on the music score in front of him. His ear is tuned to the cassette player at his side.

And Robbie Elfman's heart is focused a half-century behind him as he listens to an orchestra rehearse the symphony he has written in honor of the 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust.

Elfman was 17 when he composed the music to "We Will Tell Them." On Sunday, the piece will have its world premiere when a 56-piece symphony orchestra plays it during a concert in Encino.

Hearing professional musicians bring an amateur composer's music to life is a heady experience, Elfman is discovering.

"Oh, that's great! They put a cre-scendo on that—it sounded good!" he exclaims as he listens intently to a recording made this week at a Los Angeles Jewish Symphony orchestra practice session.

Noreen Green nods in agreement. She conducts the 13-minute symphony and has delivered the tape recording to Elfman's rooming house near USC, where he is a sophomore music student.

Green decided to include Elfman's piece in this weekend's Holocaust-themed concert after the Los Angeles Jewish Federation sent her a copy of the pencil-written composition three years ago.

Green was taken by the powerful, mournful mood conjured up by the music. And she was taken by now the West Los Angeles teenager had come to write it.

In 1998, Elfman (who is not related to film and TV music composer Danny Elfman) took a two-week excursion to Poland and Israel. He joined 7,000 other Jewish teenagers in a walk from the Auschwitz concentration camp to the nearby Birkenau camp reminiscent of that taken by Jewish prisoners executed in World War II by the Nazis.

After retracing the Holocaust victims' steps, the teenagers traveled to Israel to contrast the war camps with modern Jewish life.

When he returned home, a troubled Elfman felt the need to put his experiences on paper. He decided to write music instead of words.

"There had been somber death-march music going through my head when I walked between the two camps," Elfman said.

His composition was incomplete when it was slipped to Green, however. "It needed a second movement, one that would reflect the joy Robbie had felt when he visited Israel after seeing the camps," said Green, a Brentwood resident.

At her urging, he expanded the piece and scored it for 20 different instruments.

The completed symphony begins softly, with violins signifying Elfman's group approaching Birkenau. Entry into the death camp is depicted by more instruments creating a desolate sound. The first movement ends as the music recedes to two instruments. It morphs into the second movement with a lone flute, growing into hopeful, reassuring tones signifying the Israeli portion of the trip.

Elfman, now 20, has attended two of the orchestra's rehearsals. He said he could not resist the temptation to make last-minute fixes to his composition.

"I suggested tempo changes and dynamic changes: Did I want to hear the trumpets or the clarinet lines at this particular point? But part of rehearsal etiquette is I can raise only big issues."

Elfman said he is prepared to take a bow from his audience seat after "We Will Tell Them" is performed. The 7:30 p.m. concert at Valley Beth Shalom, 15739 Ventura Blvd., will include a second world premiere—a piano concertino written by the late Wladyslaw Szpilman, a Holocaust survivor.

Elfman acknowledged that he is braced for an overpowering experience at the concert.

That's because he remembers when his first composition was staged in public. He was a 14-year-old student at Walter Reed Jr. High School in Studio City when a piece he wrote won a PTA contest.

"Hearing it played was the most exhilarating experience I'd ever had. It was the moment I decided I wanted to become a composer."

It was a nice note to begin a career on.