ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

Susanna Rummel started teaching in South Africa not long before Nelson Mandela became its first democratically elected president in 1994. After a year, her school had incorporated about 350 black South Africans.

For Rummel, who grew up in the small Afrikaner town of Despatch, about a half-hour drive west of Port Elizabeth on the Eastern Cape, it was an exciting but scary time. No one knew what would happen.

Apart from a few parents pulling their children out of the school, the integration period went relatively smoothly. “We were so scared that it was going to be a riot but there wasn’t,” Rummel says. “It was fine.”

As a music teacher, Rummel saw many black South African students with naturally beautiful voices join her Strelitzia Secondary School choir. Their hard work and talent saw the group reach a number of awards. “They were in the top 10 in South Africa,” she says. “We won quite a lot of competitions.”

It was an incredibly rewarding introduction to teaching for someone who hadn’t intended to teach.

Now head of performing arts at Montrose Girls’ Grammar, all Rummel wanted was to be a child playing the piano.

Her late mother, Christina, was a primary school teacher and her late father, Perdu, an accountant. Older sister, Marita, is a doctor researching HIV and her brother, Thulani, is an architect now working in IT.

All loved their music, a family trait. Christina and Perdu enjoyed playing the piano and an uncle, Herman Rummel, runs South Africa’s arts and culture ministry before Winnie Mandela. “My family was exceptionally music-obsessed,” Rummel says.

Christa taught in Port Elizabeth, so her children attended primary school there. Rummel, the youngest, started at age five because the school needed students. She thrived and immediately took up the piano — learning to read music before she could read Afrikaans or English.

“I was learning,” she says. “I’ve always been a hard worker and very motivated. I did a fair amount of performing at school — I wouldn’t say I was a child prodigy or anything. It was all just through school at that stage. And then at university I started performing a lot outside and doing radio recordings for the local station.”

Rummel attended Despatch High School, where she continued to play the piano, enjoy all things music and play hockey. She graduated at 16 and went to the University of Port Elizabeth, achieving honours in music and performance.

“Teaching was not on the radar — yet. ‘To be honest with you, I never even wanted to do was to play the piano,’” Rummel says. “I was always going to study music.”

The talented young musician then studied in Italy for a year at Il Corso Atanasia, near Belluno. At 21 it was an eye opener culturally and educationally after South Africa, where the education system was strict and exam-based. “At Uni... it was very much the competitive thing that drove me,” Rummel says. “I loved doing competitions. I loved graduating at the top of my class. Then when I got to Europe it was so different. It was really just about the love of the music. It was such a contrast.”

In Italy, Rummel was asked to perform in local festivals and enjoyed the collaborative culture. Hoping to stay longer, she returned to organise her visa and taught music at a local high school to save money for her trip.

“I loved the fact that I’m still teaching 20 years later,” she says. “I loved the students. I viewed them as colleagues as well.”

After five years at Strelitzia Secondary, which is in Umhlanga near Durban, Rummel completed her teaching qualifications at the University of South Africa. She ended up spending eight years at the school.

The job was rewarding and introduced her to residents at some of the poorer settlements near her town. United by their love of music, Rummel would pick them up and drop them off from school.

She once noticed a group sitting in the rain while waiting for a music practice, to look them have for a meal. “I will never forget those three kids sitting down for dinner with us,” she says.

But by this stage Rummel was with future husband Anthony, a plumber who works in property development. They met at university and while she was at Strelitzia, Anthony decided to emigrate. Rummel had not considered such a big move, but their love was so strong she agreed to come to Australia and convert to Christianity to his Orthodox Judaism when they married. They moved to Melbourne in 1999.

Rummel knew very little about Australia, but soon fell in love. After quitting farming work, she spent eight years at Peninsula Catholic College, where she was head of performing arts and helped revamp Victoria’s music curriculum so it was recognised as one of the best in the world by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

By then she had a bachelor of music (piano) performance degree from Melbourne Conservatory of Music (piano performance), graduating at year-level peak (University of Port Elizabeth), a postgraduate diploma in piano performance (Il Corso) and a postgraduate diploma in teaching from University of South Africa.

Rummel says she’s developed a system demanding much more creativity than in South Africa, where the syllabus was much more prescribed: “I had to be much more creative in my thinking, I had to think outside the box.”

After having her first child, Ethan, now 9, Rummel moved to Montrose Girls’ Secondary College and had daughter Naomi, now 6. She moved to Montrose Girls’ Grammar in January as head of performing arts. She absolutely loves it.

Rummel has enhanced and revamped Montrose Girls’ music programme which was already highly regarded. “It’s just such a beautiful, beautiful environment,” she says. “It’s teaching heaven because they really, really value the arts. The music program here is phenomenal. It’s really well supported by the school.”

Among other things, Rummel developed the school’s unique SAIL (Supporting Arts and Independent Learning) orchestra program for years 5 and 6 students.

As part of the program, there is a focus on intercultural understanding and encouraging students’ understanding of global citizenship through music.

The girls learn with tutors and play in an orchestral setting, which is not common at primary level. In high school most students play multiple instruments and embrace non-traditional choices such as the tuba, bassoon and trombone.

“Just lifts the level because you’re coming into the senior school with experience and knowledge,” Rummel says. “The girls perform at a very high level.”

While Rummel enjoys overseeing a performing arts staff of 22, she also teaches classes including the senior students. As well as the SAIL program, she has introduced a senior orchestra and junior string orchestra.

The drama program has a unique mentor system with industry professionals mentoring girls across the school are involved in performing arts in some way.

Further students such as conductor, composer, vocalist and musician Dr Kathleen McGauley, and opera singer Jessica Boyd also return to work with the girls on special projects.

Students enjoy modern equipment and facilities, occasionally visiting and working in professional environments such as The Arts Centre Melbourne. They also learn about the health benefits of music.

Rummel is investigating research that shows music can help in healing, and keep those who play and experience it healthy. She has taken students to visit Emma O’Donoghue at Activate and Exercise and Royal Melbourne Hospital, which has inspired some to investigate this growing field.

First of all, it’s just a focus on health and well-being,” Rummel says. “I think that music can be a part of everyday stringing of life.”

As part of this, Rummel supports the Music Art World Foundation’s work to boost the profile of music in schools, and to better incorporate it into learning and life. This includes ideas such as adding the arts into the STEM program (science, technology, engineering, maths), making it STEAM.

Such initiatives are important to Rummel, who is constantly developing ways to improve the educational status of music and encourage more girls to study it in year 12. “We’ve had such massive growth over the past three years in both performance and confidence. I’d love to see the program continue to grow.”

Like so many mothers, Rummel works hard to balance work and her family, but believes in prioritising playing and listening to music with her, which helps. Ethan plays the trumpet and piano, while Naomi chose the violin. Rummel and Ethan play in the Southern Area Training Band. “They’re so excited to just grow up with it,” she says.

Life is a whirl, but this inspired ball of energy would not have it any other way. Wherever things get too hectic, she relaxes on her couch listening to playing music. “I think the best meditation is really getting stuck into a good old Rachmaninoff on the piano,” she says. “Playing music actually makes you healthier.”