

## MAIJA UPENIEKS nee SVARS: MUSIC TEACHER



My family moved from Yarraville to St Albans in 1952 and settled in Scott Avenue. My older brother, Valdis, went to the primary school in East Esplanade and then to the Sunshine Tech School in 1955. He followed in the footsteps of his father to become an engineer. I also went to that primary school and started at St Albans High School in 1962. After high school I completed the course at the Toorak Teachers College.

I've been living in Thirroul since September 1976 with my husband Karlis Upenieks in a little miner's cottage which is about 90 years old. We married al fresco in a park at that lovely little place called Austinmer, which is just north of Thirroul. To people who might remember me as Maija Svars, the girl of Latvian

background from St Albans High, you might think that I have resettled in some exotic little seaside village along the Baltic coastline, but you'd only be half right, because we are in an exotic little village on the New South Wales' coastline north of Wollongong. One of the early industries in the area was coal mining, hence the miner's cottage.

We have three beautiful daughters: Nara (aged 25), Kaija (23), and Vesma (nearly 21). Karl also speaks Latvian so we continued a family tradition by speaking to the girls in Latvian as they grew up. We attended Latvian Saturday school and the girls did HSC Latvian. We were pleased that Nara got the first order of merit when she sat for her HSC exam in 1996.



We also got involved (and still are) in music. Nara is our flute player, Kaija studies cello at ANU, and Vesma plays violin.

In 2001 Kaija played cello as part of a modern art quartet for an avante guard cabaret by Mikel Simic, which was described as a "fascinating blend of Eastern and Western European traditions, drawing on Russian folk tales, Transylvanian pseudo-Gothic mythology and Brechtian social commentary." She also helps run the Rocking Horse Music program, which is aimed at children, parents, and carers.

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In 2003, Vesma and four of her colleagues formed a folk/rock group called The Duk Duks. They are mostly second-generation Australian-Latvians who were inspired by a Latvian folk band that toured Australia. Their musical inspiration draws on ancient Baltic folk tradition as well as modern rock. They even got a write-up on the Triple J website, which is some recognition on the contemporary music scene.

So you can see that we still contribute to a strong Australian multicultural ethos in family and professional life.

I teach early childhood music to groups of mums and children aged up to 5 years at home in my lounge room. From my Teacher's College days I have also taken on board a little recorder playing and teach groups of school age children before and after school. We have fun performing at the Sydney Opera House in the combined Instrumental Festival once a year.

Our family loves parties and the girls even invited their friends to Karl's and my combined birthday this year.

Thirroul still has the feel of a seaside village. It is a lovely natural beach resort that was reasonably secluded until the electric train service to Sydney was established in 1987. That made commuting to the big smoke much easier, but it also meant a greater encroachment of the suburban sprawl. Now that small village of the 'seventies is a small town of 6,000 people and is administered as a northern suburb of greater Wollongong. The village name is based on a local Aboriginal word, thurrural, which means "the Valley of the Cabbage Tree Palms", because they were plentiful in the area. The beautiful Red Cedar was also once available here before the tree fellers got to them, and consequently the spreading Moreton Bay Fig is the most noticeable species these days.

Apart from natural beauty, Thirroul's also has a link with literary fame going back to 1923 when D H Lawrence lived here for six months while writing his "Kangaroo" book. A more recent and somewhat morbid link to the artistically famous is through Brett Whiteley, the Australian artist and painter, who died here in 1992.

The village is right on the beach. My special time of the day is sunrise, when I'm keen to be down along the beach as the colours change in the sky before the sun comes up. It gives me that happy feeling that keeps me going all day.



**Update**

Karl and I have become grandparents in early February 2006. Nara and her husband Christian had a baby girl Tija. Babies are such wonderful time wasters!

Kaija my middle daughter has graduated from ANU and is living back in Wollongong setting up an early childhood music business "Sing A Song, Dance Along" in Wollongong and Sydney.



Hi to all who remember me! If you don't ... hi anyway!

**Maija Upenieks, 2006.**

**2020 Update**



Sad news.....Maija Upenieks (Svars) passed away in October 2020 from a short illness with liver cancer ... she is being missed by all who came in touch with her ... may she rest in peace.

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