



Leo Torellas

was full of inspiration. I'm hoping to cross the Atlantic again soon.

Jo Williams

Jo is an adult amateur at diploma level, who also started teaching the piano a few months ago.

She says: My husband regularly goes away fishing in Ireland, and I got fed up not getting anything out of the deal! So I was looking for something lovely for me as well. When Finchcocks came up on Google, I thought that environment looked amazing, the small group numbers were attractive, and I really wanted to meet Graham Fitch as well, so it ticked every box.

It wasn't what I expected at all – in fact, it exceeded every expectation. You're really taken right into the family, with Neil and Harriet and their children. The accommodation is amazing, as is the food. And everyone there was so lovely and friendly. I tend to get a bit lost in

large groups, which is perhaps why I've struggled a bit on some of the other courses I've been on, but not here.

One odd coincidence: I'm from Hungerford, and it turned out that there were two other people from Hungerford as well, but we'd never met each other. One of them only lives about 200 yards from me – and now we're good friends. So it was a proper holiday for me, but with the benefit of meeting piano people. What's not to love?

I learned so much with Graham: types of finger legato, different types of staccato, flutter pedalling – things I'd never previously heard of. I've been taught by Warren Mailley-Smith as well. I'm quite a fan, and there's no way I would have got a chance to meet and study with him otherwise.

One other thing: in the summer Neil and Harriet open their own swimming pool to guests, too. There's even a picture of me in the pool on their website. A real honour!

JACKDAWS

Founded in 1993 by mezzo-soprano Maureen Lehane at her home near Frome, Somerset, Jackdaws Music Education Trust offers year-round weekend courses for pianists – children and adults – at all levels. (www.jackdaws.org.uk)

Linda Jones and Dave Young have attended.

Linda Jones

Linda is a university lecturer and amateur pianist who was recently awarded the DipABRSM in 2023.

She says: I first heard about Jackdaws from a friend, who highly recommended it. I had no prior expectations, just went along with an open mind, hoping to develop my techniques and gain some experience in performing. I've been attending the Advanced Summer School, run by Mark Tanner, for eight years now. For me, it's like being on holiday.

'I've gained so much confidence from going there. Now I wouldn't miss it for the world'

Linda Jones, on Jackdaws

Mark manages to create a very relaxed atmosphere amidst a supportive environment. He treats everyone the same, irrespective of their ability, and is patient and encouraging. He also has a great sense of humour, which means we have a lot of fun too. The sessions consist of several masterclasses for each attendee, with a concert amongst ourselves on the last afternoon. In addition, there are opportunities to play the various pianos on site for private practice over the weekend.

All courses take place in a dedicated studio newly-built in 2019, which sits beside a lake with a picturesque boat-house. There is a peaceful garden and some lovely walks nearby. I would add that the home cooking is outstanding, with fresh fruit and vegetables; and there is always plenty of tea and home-made cake on hand! I've gained so much confidence from going there. Now I wouldn't miss it for the world. ▶▶



Jo Williams



Linda Jones



Piano Week participants

‘There is a high faculty/student ratio, with plenty of excellent teachers to choose from, so you can really experience many different approaches’ **John Benger, on Piano Week**

Dave Young

Dave is an intermediate-level player (Grade 6), who started learning the piano in 2018 ‘to keep the grey cells dancing’ after his retirement in 2021.

He says: The Jackdaws website convinced me I should attend an intermediate school with Mark Tanner. I found the course to be at a perfect level for me, even though the performance element of it always left me with beads of sweat! I’ve attended a few other schools too, such as Finchcocks, and the recipe is quite similar at most of them: masterclasses, performance classes and free practice time, which works fine. This will be my fourth year at Jackdaws, and even though I live a fair way away in Lincolnshire, the five-hour drive is worth the reward.

The teaching is excellent. There’s always an element of technical advice and musical development, which really helps me. It’s all part of the ‘critique’ post-performance, and I always come away with solutions to tricky bits, or periods of contemplation or exploration that ultimately embed themselves for the better.

Overall, I keep going back and I intend to go on further courses, so they’ve certainly got it right for me. One difference with other schools, however, is the accommodation. They arrange it locally in the form of bed and breakfast.

This seems to work very well and I have never heard any negative comments. For myself, I found a little inn in Nunney nearby, and it fits me just fine.

PIANO WEEK

Piano Week was founded in 2013 by pianist Samantha Ward, and this year takes place at Dulwich College in London (July 14-19) and at Rugby School (July 20–August 3). Entirely non-selective, for both children and adults, the aim is to be as non-stressful and friendly as possible – although, as Samantha says, if you’d like it to be a boot-camp, it can be that too. (www.pianoweek.com)

Jon Benger shares his thoughts.

Jon Benger

Jon is a piano teacher, and advanced-level pianist, who has been attending Piano Week since 2019.

He says: I chose Piano Week because it provides a significant amount of one-to-one tuition compared with other courses and daily performance opportunities. I heard about it from a teacher I was studying with a few years ago who suggested it would be helpful during my diploma exam preparation – and it was.

Piano Week is of an ideal scale to have plenty going on, but at the same time small enough to have a personal

touch to address the needs of individual participants. I was delighted by the frequency and quality of the recitals by faculty members. As a teacher myself I find it particularly useful to attend the open lessons/masterclasses and pick up ideas for my own teaching.

There is a high faculty/student ratio, with plenty of excellent teachers to choose from, so you can really experience many different approaches. A few specific examples from last year include practice methods for fast movement around the keyboard, nuances to achieve a tasteful rubato in Romantic music, and integrating jazz chords seamlessly into improvisation.

There are 35 practice rooms at Rugby, and about 30 pianists attend the course – so there are plenty of opportunities to practise, too. ■

