

Hi Mark,

My wife and I have spent a fair amount of time listening to the F6 and F7. As you know, the purpose of this exercise is to find an amp that can provide a different musical experience from our tube amplifiers. After my last e-mail, I played background music on both amps for a couple of days to further break them in and then we spent some time over several evenings listening to familiar music to judge the character of each amp. Both are excellent, but in our system, we have a clear favorite.

To reconnect, the base system is an MSB DAC iv Plus with MSB's optional volume control (an impedance buffered passive attenuator in the analog output stage) and an MSB Universal Media Transport. The amps are a pair of deHavilland KE Model 50A monoblocks (KT-88 output tubes wired in triode with an interstage transformer making 40 watts). And the speakers are Auditorium 23 Hommage Ken single driver speakers built using Ken Shindo's cabinet design for the Western Electric 755 driver but using Line Magnetic's replica of the WE 755 with Alnico magnets. No specifications are published on the Hommage Ken speakers, but they are reportedly about 94 db efficient and 8 ohm nominal impedance. If you are interested, here are links to the product pages for the amps and the speakers as well as a link to Dick Olsher's review of the deHavilland amps.

<http://www.dehavillandhifi.com/50a%20kt88%20triode%20amplifier.htm>

http://www.enjoythemusic.com/superioraudio/equipment/1210/deHavilland_audio_ke_50a.htm

<http://www.auditorium-23.de/Hommage/Ken.html>

So what did we hear?

F6 vs. 50As — The overall weight and tonal presentation of the F6 is very similar to the 50As. The F6's lower midrange on down is very weighty with excellent color and drive. The F6's bass is a bit rounder than the 50As and cannot quite match the 50As pitch definition in that region. But overall, the F6 is very satisfying from the lower midrange on down. The midrange is open and clear and very similar to the 50As. Vocals are clear and naturally rendered. Matching the 50As in this regard is quite a feat! In the treble, we found the F6 a bit reserved vs. the 50As. The energy level in the upper registers does not seem to quite match the energy level from the midrange down. This tended to keep horns and the upper register of the piano more "grounded" with less uplift.

Solos on alto sax did not soar quite as much as on the 50As. But importantly, the F6 was still very musical, presenting the music in a relaxed manner that is very easy to listen to.

F7 vs. 50As — As you recall, the F7 came out of the box sounding congested and muddled and stayed that way most of the first evening. But after five or six hours in the system, the “switch flipped” and it started sounding very good. Happily, that continued to be the case! I’ll break the suspense, and say that my wife and I REALLY like this amp. It is VERY different from our 50As. Both amps are extremely musical, but they get there in very different ways. The 50As are “big tone” amps. They envelope you with great tonal color and musical drive. They are extremely coherent from top to bottom. They present the music in a very “dense” fashion. The F7 is all about clarity, lightness, and finesse. We listened to Dire Straits (“On Every Street”), Dave Brubeck Quartet (“Time Out”), and Rachel Podger Brecon Baroque’s Vivaldi Concertos (Channel Classics) with both amps and the effect was very similar. Both amps get rhythm and timing spot on. But the 50As consistently gave the music a weighty feel. While the 50As have a very open and extended treble, even in that region, the instruments have a lot of substance. The F7 solves the musical puzzle differently. It is just as extended at the top and bottom as the 50As, is extremely coherent like the 50As, and has great bass pitch definition. But all the instruments are more “lit up” in the soundstage. And in the treble range, instruments are a bit more free to soar. Where the 50As envelope the listener in the music, the F7 lets the music dance around the listener. Both approaches make for a marvelous musical experience. Just what I was looking for!

I had expected both amps to be significantly different from our 50As and expected to be the proud owner of two First Watt pieces. Obviously, keeping the F7 is a “no brainer.” And while we like the F6, after a good bit of discussion, we concluded that we just would not listen to it that often. It is just too similar to the 50As and does not really surpass the 50As in any particular department. So I’ll give you a call later today to discuss arrangements for returning the F6. I think somebody else will make better use of it. It is too good to not be listened to regularly!

I have to say, listening to both amps and discerning their characters was great fun. Thanks for the chance to try them out.

Best Wishes,
Dave Banowetz