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## First Impressions of a First Watt - the Aleph J

I'm a devotee of the high-efficiency speaker/low-powered amp paradigm. Up till now I've been dedicated to tube amps, but I've always thought that I'd like to have a really good, low power solid state amp to act as comparison and counterpoint. When I heard about the Aleph J from Nelson Pass and his new company First Watt I was intrigued. I've never owned a piece of Nelson's gear before, so when I found out the price I decided to order one and see what the fuss is all about. I purchased it through Reno Hi-Fi, and there were no glitches getting it built (on Nelson's kitchen table?) and shipped across the border into Canada. I've had it only a day, but I thought some first impressions might be interesting.

The amp arrived in good order, even making it through the UPS punt-pass-and-kick machine unscathed. When I got home I immediately put it in the system to start warming up. You can see my system at the link below, but here's a synopsis. It's a redbook-only system consisting of an Audio Note digital front end (CDT-2 transport and a 4.1x Balanced Signature DAC), Fab Audio Model 1 speakers (ultra-resolving, wide-range, 97db, 2 1/2 way dynamic speakers), a pair of ACI Titan subs and the top grade of Kimber Select signal wiring throughout. My normal amp is an ultra-tweak Audion Silver Night PX25 Special Edition. It's stuffed full of goodies from the factory - Black Gates, tantalum resistors, Audio Note silver foil signal caps, Vishay Dales in the stepped attenuator, and full silver wiring including both windings of the output transformers. That amp cost about 10 times what I paid for the Aleph J. The room is a medium size (12x19) dedicated basement room, symmetrical, quiet and very neutral due to being well-treated with EchoBuster products.

A bit over two hours into the warm-up I started playing around with preamps. I tried three - a Bent Audio Noh (a transformer-based passive), a Morrison ELAD (a well-engineered minimalist transistor unit) and an Audion Premier (a 6922-based two-box line stage with silver wiring and SS rectification). The Audion gave the best combination of dynamics, resolution, extension, transparency, harmonic development and tone, so I settled on it. I listen to a lot of singer-songwriter stuff (blues and folk music) as well as a lot of classical violin (solo, chamber and concerto works). I played a bit of everything over the following two or three hours.

The executive summary is that for my musical tastes this is the best SS amp I've ever heard. It's the first one in my experience that renders voices with that sense of intimacy and believability that top tube amps provide. In addition it has a dynamic capability that is just captivating - the pulse of the music is rendered intact, and the rhythmic drive of the amp is remarkable. Once it warmed up there was a sense of ease to the music that came from a very natural and relaxing tonal presentation. The amp has very high resolution and gives very black backgrounds. It has plenty of power for my speakers (as it should, since they do fine with 8wpc tubes). The bass is very similar to what I get from my PX25 - it's more about tunes than slam. All in all I was impressed beyond expectation. This is one lovely amplifier.

I haven't done a head-to-head comparison with my Wavelength Triton 300B SET amps

yet, but I've been listening to them a lot over the last week with the same Audion preamp. I think the Wavelengths offer more midrange bloom - that luscious tubey sound - but in every other regard I think the Alephs are equal or superior. Equal in resolution and transparency, superior in extension and dynamics. Given that the Tritons are \$12,500 amps this is one hell of a performance from the little Aleph.

I did a head-to-head with the PX25 amp though, and there the story is different. The PX25 is unquestionably better all around. Part of that may come from the system configuration - I don't need to use a preamp and an extra set of cables because it has a built-in attenuator. But a lot of the superiority comes from the PX25 tubes themselves and the ultra-exotic parts. The most important difference for me is the purity of tone that the PX25 provides. That combines with an even higher resolution and greater transparency than the Aleph to give what I call a sense of "spooky presence" - the feeling that you are listening to the original event instead of just a reproduction of it. It's hard to explain, but it's obvious when you hear the effect. I think amps like the Ongaku probably have it as well, since that's the kind of reaction I've read in reviews of that amp. In comparison, the Aleph sounds a touch rougher and seems to shave off some of the very subtle sonic cues that provide that final sense of realism. In addition it's more matter-of-fact through the midrange. While the PX25 is more linear than the 300B, it still preserves just enough of that tube sweetness to suck you in emotionally. While the Aleph is less sweet than either of those tubes, it does much better in the midrange than your average bipolar, push-pull, Class AB transistor amp, and that's one of the things that makes it so listenable for me. I will admit to missing that bit of extra tonal something I get with the PX25, though. I guess you should get a bit more when you spend ten times the money :-)

So there you have it. I think the character of the Aleph J is going to evolve a bit more as it burns in, and I'm eager to see where it settles down. In addition, it takes much longer than one evening to begin to understand an amplifier, and I suspect the Aleph is going to reward a longer courtship. Even now, though, it's a worthy addition to my stable of amplifiers, and the fact that a \$2000 sand amp isn't embarrassed in the company of \$20,000 tubes is something that Nelson should be extremely proud of.

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11-15-05

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