



“ ... the cornerstone of a very high-performing system. ”



BY BRIAN KAHN

It was only a short while ago that specialty audio retailers were filled with high-performance two-channel stereo gear and very little (if any) space was devoted to multi-channel surround products. Today is just the opposite, with the overwhelming amount of available new gear encompassing the multi-channel music and movie arena. Even though these new multi-channel setups can play everything from movies to the newest digital music formats, and even your older CD collection, there are still consumers who are disinterested in surround media, looking for a traditionally simple stereo sound system. Anthem Electronics is a company that has long prided itself in delivering value and performance to cost conscience consumers and may have just the ticket for multi-channel holdouts. The TLP 1 Preamp is a full-featured, solid state, remote-controlled stereo pream-

plifier with a host of features, including an AM/FM tuner and tone controls, attributes that are rarely found in stereo preamps.

The TLP 1 shares its aesthetic styling with Anthem's PVA line of amplifiers. Sitting in the rack above the PVA 2, the pair made a well-matched and aesthetically pleasing combination. The four-and-one-eighths-inch tall, 17.25-inch wide, 11.25-inch deep, and 14-pound unit has a front panel manufactured from three-eighths-inch-thick brushed silver aluminum, with horizontal accent lines across the bottom, making the unit look rugged yet sexy. As with the PVA 2, there is an available black finished front panel if you prefer.

The front panel layout is clean and simple, despite the fairly large number of controls.

On the left side of the panel are seven small round buttons, finished in silver finish to match the front panel. The buttons are arranged into two rows of three for direct source selection, with the seventh button to select the recording input. The only other item on the left side of the panel is a headphone jack. To the center of the panel, partially hidden in the grooves forming the accent lines, is the IR receiver. Above that are two rows of buttons and the display. The bottom row of buttons contain various tone, balance and display controls, with the upper row containing direct access buttons to radio presets. The display is a green LCD with three brightness levels. To the right of the display are two tuner buttons, a large volume control knob and a power button.

The rear panel shares an equally clean and well-planned layout. There are five pairs of line level inputs, two fixed outputs for recording and a second zone, low pass and full-range subwoofer outputs and high pass and full-range main outputs. The remainder of the back panel features antenna connections, IR receiver and relay trigger jacks and lastly a non-IEC standard two-prong power cord connection. This preamp provides no balanced connections.

The TLP 1 leverages technology and features from the universally respected Anthem AVM 20 A/V preamp. Looking through the inside of the TLP 1, I found the high-quality components and simple, clean design that have made Anthem famous.

THE SETUP

The TLP 1 preamplifier was incredibly simple to set up. I ran a 3.5mm relay trigger from the Anthem TLP 1 pre-amplifier into the back of an Anthem PVA 2, setting the power-on mode to trigger. The input jacks were spaced well enough to make connections quick and easy. The extra outputs also facilitated the connection of my subwoofer and headphone amplifier.

“... this preamplifier was performing fantastically for its price ... accurate and very detailed ... music was well paced, rhythmic and easy to listen to ... soundstage was tight and instruments were well placed ...”

THE MUSIC

I let the Anthem TLP 1 break in for a little over a week with music from the tuner. The TLP 1's tuner did a great job of receiving signal from my difficult location in the foothills. The tuner lets you select between mono, stereo, and high-blend, and memorizes your selection for each preset. After break-in, I switched to the CD input and, with its input level matching capabilities, I was able to switch between sources with no large jumps in volume.

I began my critical listening with Jack Johnson's *Brushfire Fairytales* (Universal). The first track, “Inaudible Memories,” immediately revealed the Anthem's detailed yet laid back character. The acoustic guitar was full-bodied and sweet, and Johnson's mellow singing style was well portrayed. The soundstage was tight and instruments were well placed. My first impression was that this preamplifier was performing fantastically for its price. I next auditioned the headphone function of the TLP 1 with the same piece of music, using my Grado RS-1 headphones. The performance was acceptable, but a definite step down in quality from what I had heard from my speakers. The headphone output had a higher noise floor and restricted dynamics. If you intend to do a large amount of headphone listening, I would strongly recommend an outboard headphone amplifier.

I next listened to the late Barry White's *Staying Power* (Private Music). I was not surprised to find that the Anthem had no problems with Barry's voice. Although his voice was rich and deep, I was however able to discern some loss of detail and texture that is normally present in White's singing. When the track “The Longer We Make Love” came on, I was able to hear what the Anthem could do with female vocals as Chaka Khan performs this duet alongside White. Khan's voice was well portrayed without any chestiness or sibilance. The soundstage was larger than on the Jack Johnson album, with a bit more air around the individual instruments.

“... voice was rich and deep ... well portrayed without any chestiness or sibilance ... strings were right on ... drums were spot on.”

I then decided to speed things up a bit. The Anthem performed well on slower paced music, but how would it perform on higher-energy music? I played U2's “Bullet the Blue Sky” off of their *Joshua Tree* release (Island). Having heard this song performed live numerous times, as well as through several reference quality systems, I felt that the TLP 1 was both accurate and very detailed. While listening to “I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For,” the limitations of the TLP 1 all but disappeared. The music was well paced, rhythmic and easy to listen to. In this track, the vocals and strings were right on and the drums were spot on. The only possible complaint thus far would be the slightest lack of weight in the lowest bass.

Overall, the soundstage was a bit tighter and more intimate with the Anthem system than on my much more expensive Krell reference system. I was able to discern more air around the instruments and a more three-dimensional picture with the TLP 1. The Anthem's sonic character is on the warm, laid back side of neutral, without adding any unnatural sonic artifacts to the sound, making for a non-fatiguing, easy to listen to for hours sound.

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DOWNSIDE

The Anthem TLP 1 is an entry-level high-performance two-channel stereo preamp. It's priced extraordinarily low for both its features and its performance. One of the few knocks was its lack of weight and overall detail, although this is only when compared with much higher priced preamps. While detail

is essential for achieving quality sound reproduction, a balance can be good. I found this balance to be both a plus and a strength. In some pieces of music, I found the TLP 1 to lack the transient snap that I so adore, yet I found that I was listening longer and enjoying my music more due to its gentle non-fatiguing nature. As always, you will want to audition this product to find if this balance is right for you.

I defy you to find a preamp at this price that doesn't have limitations, yet you'll want to assure that this flavor is right for you. If you are an in-your-face music lover, you might want to audition this and other comparably-priced preamps.

"Its sweet tone and rich sounding character make it a great product for music lovers ... and audiophiles alike ... a huge improvement over any stereo receiver."

CONCLUSION

The Anthem TLP 1 is well built, looks good, and has more features than almost any other separate preamplifier on the market. Most of us remember when two-channel preamps didn't even have a remote. This has the remote, AM/FM tuner, tone controls; remote triggers for custom install applications and more. And let's not forget its price. At its very affordable price, this product could be the cornerstone of a very high-performing system that, when paired with the Anthem PVA 2, falls into the price range of nearly every consumer. Its sweet tone and rich-sounding character makes it a great product for music lovers and mullet-wearing, pocket-protector sporting audiophiles alike. If you can afford the step, this is a huge improvement over any stereo receiver.