

TLP 1 • PVA 2



TLP 1



PVA 2

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INTRODUCTION

I am one of the few reviewers for *Secrets* who still owns a two-channel setup. Many of our writers have converted to multi-channel systems for both music and movies. I have done this in my home theater, but I still have a two-channel system for everyday listening in my living room. This system is used for music, TV, and even the occasional movie. It is turned on from the time we get home from work till we go to bed at night, logging far more time than our home theater.

The general public has followed a similar trend, and the majority of systems sold today are multi-channel capable. This trend has caused two-channel equipment to become more exotic or what might be called enthusiast equipment. Unfortunately along with this stigma comes a higher price. The prices

might be justifiable, since production runs of two-channel equipment are smaller, but in most cases companies are raising prices simply because the market allows them to.

Those who believe it is not possible to build a two-channel listening environment from multi-channel components should think again. As ADC/DAC prices fall and advanced designs and components enter the multi-channel world, they can and do sound every bit as good as a two-channel system. If you are considering spending \$3000 or more on a very expensive two-channel preamp, you might want to investigate some of the newer surround processors on the market, because you might get more value for your money.

ANHEM TLP 1 AND PVA 2

Anthem has taken a slightly different approach to building a two-channel offering. They have effectively leveraged their multi-channel R&D to build a lighter and more affordable two-channel setup. The TLP 1 and the PVA 2 reviewed here are proof that what makes a good multi-channel setup can also make an excellent two-channel setup, at a substantially reduced cost.

ANHEM TLP 1 PREAMPLIFIER

From the onset of setting up the TLP 1, it is easy to tell Anthem leveraged the technology in the AVM 20 to create the TLP 1. Of course, they toned down the features substantially, but left everything that is needed for even a reasonably complex two-channel setup.

“... the best sounding preamp I have heard for a price less than \$1,000. It has no quirks to speak of and measures as good on the bench as it sounds in the living room.”

The TLP 1 is a remote controlled two-channel preamp with a built in AM/FM tuner and a few other secrets including a subwoofer channel, so you could call it a 2.1-channel preamp. Anthem uses a digitally controlled analog attenuator for volume control. This has several advantages. First, it allows for 0.5 dB increments in volume and plenty of attenuation for any power amp or listening level. Secondly, it allows the levels of each input to be biased in relation to one another so when you flip from the tuner to the CD player to the TV, you will not be blasted with extreme volume differences. Third, the master volume knob can be used to control other functions beyond volume, e.g., tuner, tone, balance, and display brightness adjustments. It will also come up to full brightness when you are making changes but dim back down to your preset level after a few seconds.

The front panel of the TLP 1 includes buttons for direct selection of any source. Using the record button in combination with the source will select which source will appear on the record output. The six tuner preset buttons in combination with the AM/FM source button's 4 memory locations give you a total of 24 AM/FM presets, plenty more than needed in my local area. Tone controls include bass, treble, and contour (we will talk about contour later) which are adjusted with the volume control once selected and can be bypassed with another button on the front panel. And of course, what would any preamp be without a balance control and a 1/4" headphone jack, both of which I consider to be a necessity.

On the back panel a full array of inputs and outputs are included. There are five stereo inputs: CD, TAPE, DVD, VCR, and SAT/AUX. On the output side we have even more selections starting with two fixed outputs, one for the record loop and the other for an alternate zone which contains the same source as the record output selection. Secondly, there are two subwoofer outputs, one full range so you can make use of the subwoofer's controls, and another with an 80 Hz, 24 dB/octave crossover. The two main outputs consist of one full range output and one high-passed with an 80 Hz, 12 dB/octave crossover to be used in conjunction with the low-pass subwoofer output. Anthem has also included a relay trigger for turning on other components and an IR receiver jack if you have the TLP 1 out of sight. Standard AM and FM antenna hooks are also included.

Anthem has supplied a multi-device remote with the TLP 1. It is not a learning remote, but can be programmed to control other devices. The remote contains all the same functionality as the front panel, including direct source selection, record, balance, and tone controls, plus a few bonuses like discrete on and off commands and direct access to the display brightness. The remote has a slightly rubber texture which grips odd angles better than a standard plastic remote. The remote is not back lit, so it can be somewhat cumbersome in the dark,

but due to the button shapes and layout you can become accustomed to it fairly quickly.

Using the TLP 1 is a pleasure. The direct source access with adjustable levels make flipping back and forth between sources a seamless process, and when you do go to adjust the volume, you will love the 0.5 dB increments, allowing for the perfect level to be achieved. The volume ramps faster or slower depending on how long you hold the button on the remote or the speed the dial is spun. It just feels natural all around. Anthem also supplies Pronto remote configuration files for all their components on their website. Macros are simplified with the TLP 1, as discrete remote codes are supplied for everything, including power.

CONTOUR CIRCUIT

An interesting addition to the TLP 1 is a contour circuit, which could be considered a next generation loudness control. Human hearing is less sensitive at low levels to both the upper and lower frequency extremes. The contour circuit adds additional bass and treble as volume decreases giving the perception of a consistent ramp for the entire frequency spectrum. Fifteen years ago, most preamps included a loudness circuit to add a fixed amount of compensation, but Anthem's ability to control the amount as volume changes is pretty innovative and a good use of new technology.

As with all new features this one is not perfect. My speakers are a little more efficient than the speakers Anthem equalized the contour circuit with, so the bass and treble are accented too much on my setup as volume decreases. My guess is if you have Paradigm speakers or any speaker in the 87 dB — 89 dB in-room efficiency range it will be just about perfect, but my Mirage's 91 dB is just a little too much.

After using this preamp in my two-channel setup for three months, all I can say is from a functionality perspective, this is without a doubt the nicest two-channel preamp I have ever used. Looking at the price point, there are only a few competitive offerings in the space that even come close.

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ANTHEM PVA 2 POWER AMPLIFIER

As I mentioned above, both items here leverage Anthem's multi-channel family of products. In the case of the PVA 2 it is simply a two-channel version of the PVA 5 and PVA 7. Since *Secrets* has already taken an in depth look at the PVA 7, I see no reason to go in to details here, simply check out Brian Florian's review of the PVA 7 ([available on the Anthem website at www.anthemAV.com](http://www.anthemAV.com)).

As an additional note to Brian's review I will also comment on how cool both the PVA 2 and the TLP 1 run. On even the hottest of days inside a glassed-in cabinet, neither component get more than warm to the touch.

HOME THEATER 2.1

I admit I do not always use my Home Theater for watching movies. Sometimes I just use the two-channel system in the living room simply because it is easier, and for documentaries and sitcoms stereo sound gives you much of the effect anyway. A month or so ago there was an article in a print magazine about two-channel home theater setups. The writer and the editor had some very opposing opinions on the subject, and my opinions are somewhere in between. One thing I am sure all three of us would agree on is that a subwoofer makes the home theater experience more enjoyable. So, I would like to put Anthem's TLP 1/PVA 2 combo at the top of my list of recommended two-channel home theater components. Anthem put the forethought into adding a subwoofer output into their two-channel offering, so I think they deserve the recommendation.

I have nothing to criticize about this pair other than I wish Anthem would have used a standard IEC style power cord on the TLP 1 instead of the one they chose.

“Female vocals were natural and full ... the bass line – was driven with authority and definition ... soundstage – imaged very well and easily extended past the speakers.”

SOUND

As you can tell I am very happy with the TLP 1/PVA 2 combo. It has a powerful tightly controlled bottom end and a natural upper end that is not harsh or bright. My wife mainly listens to country, certainly not my preferred choice, but the TLP 1 does a very admirable job of reproducing it. I recently brought her home a *She Daisy* DVD-A disc, and even listening to the non DVD-A two-channel track on the Anthem combo made me tap my shoe.

I personally put lots of Jazz, Pop, and New Age CDs through the system. A couple of memorable CDs that stood out of the mix were Diana Krall's *Live in Paris*, Peter White's *Glow* and the DVD-A from Big Phat Band. All excellent recordings and the TLP 1/PVA 2 did justice to them all. Female vocals were natural and full, while the bass line of the Big Phat band was driven with authority and definition. The soundstage was a little more upfront than my regular setup, but it imaged very well and easily extended past the speakers.

I still prefer the Sonic Frontiers Line 1 and a couple of other tubed preamps over the TLP 1/PVA 2, but that said, tubes are not for everyone, and I have come to the point I don't even recommend tubes in systems that are used more than 3–5 hours a day like I was doing with the Anthems. Bottom line: in the solid state world, this package is a major performer.

“I would like to put Anthem's TLP 1/PVA 2 combo at the top of my list of recommended two-channel home-theater components.”

CONCLUSIONS

If you have a system that needs the functionality of a new style SSP, but you only have two speakers and possibly a subwoofer, check out the Anthem TLP 1 and PVA 2. The combo brings the technology of today to the systems of yesterday (somehow, this sentence sounds like it belongs as the headline for a print magazine review). The TLP 1 from a functionality perspective is about as good as you are going to get with a two-channel preamp, and is the best sounding preamp I have heard for a price less than \$1,000. It has no quirks to speak of and measures as good on the bench as it sounds in the living room. The price is less than a weekend vacation to Vegas (depending on whether or not you gamble, drink booze, and chase women), and the enjoyment will last for years to come.