



“The value offered by the TLP 1 is well off the charts.”

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BY JOHN CROSSETT

REVIEW SUMMARY

Sound: "Relaxed"—"no forward, punchy, etched, or bright (and ultimately fatiguing) sound here"; "the TLP 1 could still get up and rock when asked"; not the last word in detail retrieval or bass and treble extension, but "offering easy-to-enjoy sonics that went far beyond expected."

Features: "Multi-zone solid-state [learning] remote-controlled line-stage preamplifier" laden with features, including an AM/FM tuner and headphone jack; "peace of mind" comes from the five-year warranty.

Use: "The TLP 1 gives its owner a number of connection choices and great flexibility," so you'll want to read the manual.

Value: "Products such as the TLP 1 offer hope to consumers who want to build a versatile high-end system without having to spend an arm and a leg."

Have audiophiles, in their never-ending lust for the lowest price on a piece of equipment, given too little thought to the concept of value? At times it seems so. Yet a great deal on something that doesn't really fit your needs is less of a buy than spending a bit more than you might want but gaining greater enjoyment from the equipment purchased.

Anthem, a division of Sonic Frontiers, has a tradition of being a value-oriented company catering to the audiophile on a budget. While not offering purely the least expensive gear available, Anthem has always striven to make sure that every piece of its equipment offers more

than the selling price would suggest. As it's a few years since a piece of Anthem equipment has been in my listening room, I was very pleased to see the value-laden TLP 1 line-stage preamplifier (along with its companion PVA 2 power amp, to be covered soon) arrive for review. But the proof is in the listening—after all, equipment is of *no* value if the sound isn't up to snuff.

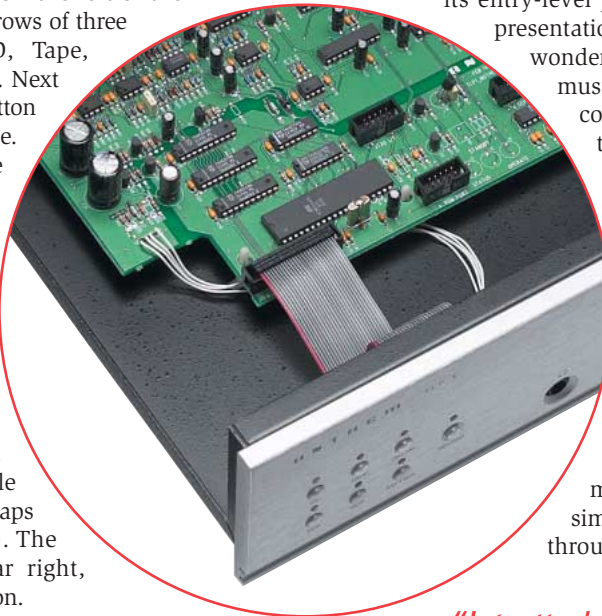
THE DETAILS

The TLP 1 is a multi-zone solid-state remote-controlled line-stage preamplifier designed as the centerpiece of a budding audiophile's A/V system—but with an added twist: a built-in tuner. Prospective purchasers will also be interested in how much circuitry from Anthem's top-of-the-line AVM 20 surround-sound processor (a 2002 SoundStage! Network

Reviewers' Choice component and award winner) has trickled down to the TLP 1. According to Nick Platsis of Anthem, the TLP 1 shares much of the same buffered and band-limited input-selectivity functions of the AVM 20. Anthem feels that this is of great importance for good crosstalk performance in a multi-zone unit such as the TLP 1. Beyond that, the similarities pretty much end, but it's nice to see that even Anthem's lower-priced equipment has the same sonic considerations as the company's higher-priced gear.

"... easy musical flow ... eminently enjoyable ..."

The TLP 1 measures 17 1/4" W x 4 1/8" H x 11 1/4" D and weighs a respectable 14 pounds. On the left of the brushed silver faceplate are two rows of three buttons for source selection: CD, Tape, AM/FM, DVD, VCR, and Sat-Aux. Next to them is a slightly larger Record button with a headphone jack next in line. Just to the right of center is the LCD display (which can be dimmed, but not turned off completely), with the Station Tune and Stereo/High Blend/Mono buttons just beyond. Under the display you'll find a row of six tuner preset buttons flanked to their right by those for up and down station seek. And below those are buttons for, from left to right, Balance, Bass, Treble, Tone Bypass (an audiophile nicety), Mute, and Contour (perhaps better known as a loudness control). The large volume knob is on the far right, along with the power on/off button.



I know this may sound like a lot of bells and whistles on such a slim faceplate, but it really isn't. The manner in which Anthem laid out the TLP 1 keeps it from appearing at all cluttered, and the preamp is designed for the high-end initiate who will consider many of these functions not just add-ons, but necessities. Another point in the TLP 1's favor is that all these functions can be handled either via the front panel or the included remote control. The learning remote can be programmed to handle certain features of your other A/V equipment, too.

Moving around to the back of the unit you'll find a ground terminal, a two-prong removable power cord (not the standard three-prong IEC variety), an I.R. Receiver jack for use in multi-room systems, a Relay Trigger jack that allows you to turn on and off all other triggered equipment from the preamp, six sets of single-ended gold-plated input jacks, inputs for both coax FM and spring-clip AM antennas, and finally six different sets of single-ended output jacks. It's here with the output connections that reading the owner's manual really aids in proper setup. You get your choice of either full-range or high-pass (for a satellite/subwoofer speaker setup) main outputs, full-range or low-pass subwoofer outputs, and two fixed-level outputs usable for VCR or cassette taping. So the

TLP 1 gives its owner a number of connection choices and great flexibility. Setup was easy, once I'd read the manual.

A final feature of the TLP 1 is the peace of mind that accompanies Anthem's limited five-year warranty (one year for the remote control). In a world of one- or two-year warranties, it's good to know that you can get any problem you might encounter with the TLP 1 repaired well into the future. Very thoughtful.

VALUE IS IN THE EAR OF THE BEHOLDER

If I had to use just one word to describe the TLP 1's sound, it would be *relaxed*. There was no forward, punchy, etched or bright (and ultimately fatiguing) sound here. I was pleasantly surprised at how listenable the TLP 1 was, especially given its entry-level price. In so far as I enjoy a relaxed presentation more than an overly bright one, I wondered how the TLP 1 would fare on music that thrives on power, dynamic contrasts and transient speed. To test this, I began my listening session with Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" from Reference Recordings *Copland* CD [Reference Recordings RR-93]. This track benefits from all the dynamic prowess and speed it can get. The TLP 1's easy musical flow allowed it to render the music in an eminently enjoyable way. The TLP 1 did tend to soften the dynamics a bit, lessening the music's power, but Copland's plain, simple, yet masterful tribute shone through.

"I trotted out both CD and SACD copies of Miles Davis' 'Kind of Blue'... the TLP 1 allowed me to hear many of the differences between the two formats, such as the wider, deeper soundstage and the 'realness' of the musicians on the SACD."

I also wanted to test the pace, rhythm, and timing of the TLP 1. You might think, as did I, that the TLP 1's easy-on-the-ears musical outlook would be at odds with the concept of PRAT. *Swingin' & Burnin'* by John Coccozzi [Mapleshade CD 06652] is a disc that relies heavily on pace and rhythm to drive the music along—it's dance-band music after all. The TLP 1 offered good snap to big Joe Maher's drum set, which is the force that drives this album. There was also good rhythmic coherency and nice shimmer given to Coccozzi's vibes, even though there was less in the way of upper harmonic information, and I could no longer tell whether the vibes were made of steel or aluminum. Still, I got so wrapped up in the music that I was ready to grab my wife and hit the dance floor.

*“... good snap...good rhythmic coherency
... nice shimmer ... I got so wrapped up
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Then, to get a handle on whether the TLP 1 had the ability to resolve all of the detail that helped create the illusion of live music, and which we audiophiles crave, or whether it would be obscured by the TLP 1's relaxed presentation, I trotted out both CD and SACD copies of Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* [Columbia/Legacy CK 64935 and CS 64935]. The TLP 1 allowed me to hear many of the differences between the two formats, such as the wider, deeper soundstage and the *realness* of the musicians on the SACD. But at the same time, it didn't portray the same amount of air from the ambient recording space, and it somewhat lessened the three-dimensionality of the proceedings. Still, I was impressed by how well the preamp handled the comparison. I've heard costlier preamps that did no better in this regard.

The TLP 1 could still get up and rock when asked. William Topley's latest CD, *Feasting with Panthers* [Lost Highway CD 088 170 241-2], brought this point home. While the TLP 1 tended to smooth over the rough edges of Topley's voice a bit, it was still identifiable and stirring. The bass, the foundation of rock, was a bit weaker than I was used to, but it was there in enough quantity (if not quality) to propel the music along, allowing rock to be an enjoyable part of the TLP 1's musical diet.

The TLP 1's tone controls came in handy for video viewing, adding a welcome boost to both frequency extremes (depending, of course, on how far you turn them). But the audiophile in me wouldn't suggest using them for critical listening, as their boost came at the expense of some midrange purity. The Tone Defeat button included on the TLP 1 is a great feature, allowing you to set the tone controls for videos and then, with the push of a button, take them out of the circuit for music.

When I switched my listening attention to the built-in tuner, I was pleased at the quality Anthem included for such a modestly priced preamp. I don't pay much attention to FM these days, as most stations compress their signals to such an extent that they become listenable only in the car, and I live in an area that is death for most FM signals anyway. Yet the TLP 1 tuner clearly brought in all the stations I'm used to receiving, and a few others besides. The High Blend/Mono switch went a long way toward allowing me to at least enjoy stations at home that I usually get only in my car. The quality of the tuner in the TLP 1 is an added bonus that slips even more value into the preamp's mix, and while there are definitely better tuners available, albeit at much higher prices, the one in the TLP 1 performed better than I expected.

COMPARISONS

When I compare the features offered by the TLP 1 versus those of my \$2495 Audio Research SP16, a 2002 Reviewers' Choice product, I am amazed that Anthem can package so much for so little. While both preamps offer remote control, the Anthem's is more

complete, and a learning remote to boot. I was also impressed with the Anthem's inclusion of a tuner, tone and balance controls, and multiple output jacks. My SP16, on the other hand, countered with its phono stage, stereo/mono switching, and tube circuitry. And all of this naturally led to a comparison of the sound. Considering the price difference, I was surprised at how close the Anthem TLP 1 managed to come to the ARC SP16. The TLP 1 gave me the same wide soundstage, albeit with less depth than the SP16. Images were rock solid with both units, although it would have made for a more enjoyable listening experience had the TLP 1 been able to put a bit more flesh on the bones. Perhaps this is where the SP16's tube circuitry is at its best. But the biggest differences I heard in comparing the two were in the completeness of the notes and extension on both ends of the frequency spectrum. While good in every sense, the TLP 1 smoothed out transient information somewhat and left me grasping for detail that I knew was on the recordings. It also didn't extend as deep down low or as far up top, though certainly more than the difference in price would have had me believe.

Between the TLP 1 and the \$795 Blue Circle CS preamp I reviewed a few months back, the TLP 1 offers far more in the way of features, while the Blue Circle preamp counters with hand-built attention and audiophile simplicity. Each approaches sound from a different angle as well and aims at a different listener—the Anthem with its inherent relaxation, and the CS with greater vividness and a more up-front perspective.

*“... an inexpensive preamp loaded
with features and offering easy-to-
enjoy sonics ...”*

CONCLUSION

There are times in a reviewer's life when his conceptions regarding the hierarchy of equipment are put to the test. Listening to the Anthem TLP 1 was one of those moments for me. Here is an inexpensive preamp loaded with features and offering easy-to-enjoy sonics that went far beyond what I expected. Sure, there are tradeoffs Anthem had to make to bring the TLP 1 in at its price point, but they were intelligently made in my opinion. The value offered by the Anthem TLP 1 is well off the charts, especially when considering the features offered at such an affordable price.

Products such as the Anthem TLP 1 offer hope to consumers who want to build a versatile high-end system without having to spend an arm and a leg. If this description fits you, then make a visit to your local Anthem dealer to find out that the terms *high value* and *high end* are not mutually exclusive.