



TLP 1



PVA 2

“... performed flawlessly ... the best sonic bargain I’ve yet to find.”

**The audiophile voice**

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BY JAMES T. FRANE

Canada’s Sonic Frontiers offers a terrific bargain for your musical enjoyment with two solidstate units from their Anthem line, the TLP 1 preamp-tuner and the 125-watt stereo PVA 2 power amplifier. The complete Anthem line offers another preamp tuner with a video processor as well as a multi-channel power amplifier of higher power output. All Anthem units come with black chassis and your choice of silver or black front panels. The TLP 1 preamp-tuner and the PVA 2 power amplifier reviewed here came with the silver front that I found to be an enjoyable visual change of pace, contrasting nicely with my equipment.

**TLP 1 PREAMP-TUNER**

The TLP 1 has an information display window that is a half-inch tall by four inches long in the center of the front panel. There’s one large knob (the master

control) to the right, and many other function buttons spread across the front, 24 in all. From left to right (some are in rows above others), they are:

Functions: CD, Tape, FM-AM, DVD, VCR, Sat-Aux, and Record. You can listen to one source while recording another. To select a record path, press the Record button followed by the Source (within 3 seconds).

Station preset buttons 1-6. There are 18 FM and 6 AM stations. As there are only six buttons, one pushes the FM-AM button to access each set of six. Stations can be stored during scanning.

Seek: Radio stations can be selected manually by turning the master control or using the Seek button. Holding the Seek button in briefly will sample each station for a few seconds. Pressing the

button again will stop scanning at the current station.

Balance/Display: Push this button to show the status of balance or the display brightness, which can then be controlled by the master control knob. Push it once to control balance or twice for display brightness.

Bass, Treble, Bypass: Select Bass or Treble buttons to allow adjustment with the master control. The Bypass button circumvents the tone controls entirely.

Mute silences the output.

Contour: When turned on, Contour adds graduated increases of bass and treble as the sound level is lowered below the -20 dB setting in order to compensate for the ear’s reduced sensitivity at low levels.

Tune turns the master control into an AM-FM tuning knob.

ST-HB-MN selects FM reception as stereo, high blend, or monaural to provide better reception on weak stations.

Power turns the unit on and off.

The front panel also contains a headphone jack and indicator LEDs for source selection buttons, contour, and power. Plugging headphones into the jack mutes the output to the speakers. On first use, the volume of each input can be separately adjusted to equalize sound levels when changing sources. This is a very handy feature that is lacking on most preamps I've seen.

The manual cautions against using a power line conditioner with the TLP I because of possible incompatibilities. In addition, it's not required as the TLP 1 power supply includes filtering and voltage regulation. The detachable power cord has two conductors (no ground) and a reversible two-prong plug.

The master control knob is detented and feels notchy as you rotate it. In the "volume" adjust mode, each detent is a half dB change in volume. You can make endless rotations of the knob, as there are no stops.

*"Coupled with its fine AM-FM tuner, with myriad adjustments and memory features, as well as a fine and fully functional remote control, it is the best sonic bargain I've yet to find. Within its price range, the Anthem TLP 1 is the best preamp I have yet had the pleasure to review."*

The back panel has five pairs of gold-plated RCA jacks for source inputs that correspond to the front panel selection switches, plus spring-loaded AM and coax FM antenna connections. There are also six pairs of outputs. From the left, the first pair is a fixed line level output for tape deck or VCR. The second pair is labeled "Zone 2" allowing the sources connected to the preamp to be routed by wiring to another room. The following four pairs of outputs are for power amps; one pair each for subwoofer low pass or full range, and a second set for power amp high pass or full range.

The battery-powered (2 AA cells) remote control furnished with the TLP 1 repeats all of the front panel controls. As this is a universal remote, its actions must be directed to the proper item of equipment before the action is selected. For example, to execute a command on the DVD player in the system, DVD must first be selected, followed by the desired action. Directions for setting up the remote to operate different components are included. The 8-1/4-inch long by 2-1/4-inch wide black plastic remote has a soft rubberized finish reminiscent of suede and 51 buttons in groups of three and four across. The remote worked from any angle in front of the preamp or to its side. The remote is impressively complete and responsive. Actions are executed with a few milliseconds delay as the command

is processed. On the back of the TLP 1, there is a relay trigger connection that can be wired to another component, such as a power amp, with a like feature to enable the TLP I to turn it on and off. There is an infrared receiver connection to allow using the remote from another room. To accomplish this, a repeater is installed in the room and wired to this connection.

The well-written 27-page TLP 1 owners manual is one of the most complete I've seen. Explanations and illustrations are clear and complete. As this is a preamp with many more features than I usually encounter, I was pleased to find that the accuracy and clarity of these instructions went a long way towards minimizing frustrations. The logical design of the TLP 1 allows one to install and operate it without a glance at the instructions, but reading them will help a person take advantage of its many features.

*"This power amp performed flawlessly. There was no operational noise, and no turn-on or -off thumps or other anomalies."*

## PVA 2 POWER AMPLIFIER

The PVA 2 is designed to match the TLP 1 aesthetically, although it is taller and has only a power button and an LED on the front. The LED is green when the amp is on and red when the amp is on standby in either the trigger- or auto-on mode. Instructions strongly suggest a minimum of 12 inches free space above the amp for adequate cooling.

Substantial internal heat sinks are vented through generous slots in the top of the cover. I installed the PVA 2 on top of a cabinet with about a foot of space above it and open space all around; it became only slightly warm to the touch during operation. The detachable power cord has a polarized two-blade plug (one blade wider than the other) with no ground wire. This is the only power amp I recall seeing very recently that didn't use a three-blade, grounded plug.

The back of the amp has jacks for trigger input (see the description for the TLP I above), and a selector switch for the "on" modes. They are:

**Manual-On:** The amp is turned on and off by the front panel pushbutton.

**Trigger-On:** This is a 5 to 24 volt a.c. or d.c. input to allow remote on and off switching from another component.

**Auto-On:** A mode where the amp turns on when it senses an input signal. With this mode, the front power button is left on.

## LISTENING TO THE PAIR

**Tuner Performance:** I compared the number and quality of the FM stations received by my 1986 vintage Denon and the TLP I using a yagi-type directional FM antenna aimed toward San Francisco and Berkeley. The Denon found 24 good stations (good stereo reception), 6 fair (listenable in mono), and 10 poor (listenable in mono with some static). The TLP 1 found 21 good, 6 fair and 5 poor stations. The FM threshold on the

TLP 1 was a bit higher than that of the Denon, so that weaker stations were muted. The sound quality of both tuners on stations giving good stereo reception was about the same. The high blend and monaural switches for FM improved a weak station's reception.

All of the great features imaginable would be of little use in a preamp-tuner that didn't have good sound, but it was easy to enjoy the TLP 1 right out of the box. I suspect others had used the review unit as someone seemed to have desired a +6 dB setting for the treble, but that was easily changed. I used a wide variety of music to audition the TLP 1 and its PVA 2 mate.

My reference Bryston preamp had some better sonic attributes than the TLP I, but this didn't surprise me, given the fact the Bryston is almost twice the price of the TLP I and PVA 2 combined. The following comparisons were made with the TLP I or the Bryston paired with the Anthem PVA 2 power amp. Levels were matched. On *The Kirby Stone Touch* by The Kirby Stone Four LP (Columbia CS 8164), the performers gained their own distinct locations on a stage of increased depth with the Bryston, attributes that were not as evident with the TLP I. They seemed to be in the room just behind the speakers. On Dave McKenna's *Giant Strides* (Concord Jazz CCD-4099), an album that tends toward a slightly edgy sound, "Windsong" and "Dave's Blues" were a bit mellower with an added bass extension on the Bryston. Diana Krall's voice and piano on "Let's Fall In Love", "I Love Being Here With You", and "The Look of Love" from her *Live In Paris* album (Verve 440 065 109-2) was slightly shallower and more recessed on the TLP I, and lacked the depth and warmth it had with the Bryston. With the Anthem, there was the very slightest of added edge to her voice and the instruments.

I listened to Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 in E flat major (Eroica), performed by The Met Orchestra conducted by James Levine (Deutsche Grammophon D 105753) and Schubert's Symphony No. 8 (Unfinished) from the same CD. Both had more of the sound and sense of size of the concert hall and the width and depth of the orchestra with the Bryston. Switching to late '60s rock, "My Best Friend" and other cuts from Jefferson Airplane's *Surrealistic Pillow* (RCA PCD 13 766) extended to the outsides of the speakers and had more front-to-back depth and layering, as well as increased bass warmth on the Bryston compared to the TLP I. "Because of You" from *The Essential Tony Bennett* (RPM/Columbia/Legacy C2K 86634) was a little wider, deeper and just the smallest bit mellower with the Bryston. "Left My Heart in San Francisco" has excess sibilance on this album, which didn't sound great with the Bryston, but was too strident on the Anthem.

When I tried the Anthem preamp with my Parasound power amp of similar power output, I was unable to detect any differences. Both had plenty of power margin and handled dynamics well. I auditioned this combination with different albums, including *Jazz At The Pawnshop* (Prophone PRCD 7778) and *Vince Guaraldi's Greatest Hits* (Fantasy FCD-7706-2). My experience has been that power amplifiers of similar types and power ratings that are used within their output limits have sounded the same in my system. Sometimes, it takes a little more or less preamp output to drive a given power amp, which results in different speaker volume with the same volume control setting.

*"This winning combination of matched gear may be impossible to beat at its price point ... I would be hard-pressed to come up with a superior alternative combo or separates at their prices."*

### TLP 1 SUMMARY

I listened to FM, records, and CDs of many ages and types of music recorded in venues ranging from studios through clubs to concert halls. There were differences in the sound of the Anthem TLP 1 and the Bryston preamp. The considerably more expensive Bryston sound had, in general, more stage depth, front-to-back layering, separation of performers, width and a little more warmth. The TLP I was still quite enjoyable for listening, and stood up very well in such a comparison. There was no audible crosstalk between sources. Coupled with its fine AM-FM tuner, with myriad adjustments and memory features, as well as a fine and fully functional remote control, it is the best sonic bargain I've yet to find. Within its price range, the Anthem TLP I is the best preamp I have yet had the pleasure to review.

### PVA 2 SUMMARY

This power amp performed flawlessly. There was no operational noise, and no turn-on or-off thumps or other anomalies. I found the binding posts to be easy to use and I could obtain and maintain tight connections to spade lugs on speaker cable. The posts also accept banana plugs. Both the input jacks and output posts are widely separated, a feature I applaud. I have found speaker connections too closely spaced, making it a challenge to prevent shorts. The power output was more than adequate for my speakers, which are on the more sensitive side, and my listening habits, which do not exceed unamplified live levels. If you have speakers of low sensitivity or like to listen at high levels or fill a very large room, you may require more power. The amp was always cool running, and caused no problems when stacked on top of the TLP 1.

### OVERALL SUMMARY

This is a winning combination of matched equipment, but they each performed well as separate components. I found them both aesthetically pleasing, and it's nice to have a choice of silver or black faceplates.