

“... impressively powerful ...
dynamic, and crystalline.”



BY JEFF FRITZ

You think it's tough keeping up with all the changes in the A/V world? Imagine how tough it is for manufacturers. Ten years ago, stereo was king. Today, everything seems to be multichannel. The only real question these days is how many channels is that?

Could be 5.1. Some folks are shooting for 6.1. And others, of course, are pushing for 7.1. The only sure bet is that, no matter which standard wins in the long run, most people won't have the right number of amplification channels on hand. Unless, that is, they've decided to cover all the bets with a product like Anthem's remarkably affordable seven-channel power amplifier, the PVA 7.

Seven channels for under \$1500. That almost seems too good to be true.

AT SIXES AND SEVENS . . .

When the home-theater boom began, lots of manufacturers added three-channel amplifiers to their lines. It seemed appropriate and logical to assume that most consumers already had a stereo amp and would just need to add three more channels to complete a 5.1 system (most subwoofers are powered, taking care of the “.1”). I'm sure more than a few of them sold, and probably still do today.

Three-channel amplifiers didn't suit everyone, though. There was the odd passive subwoofer out there, and for folks who owned these, among others, a few four-channel units were released. Consumers could run their subs, centers, and surrounds with these, and

with their existing stereo amps, they were set. This was probably even a less-likely niche than the three-channel models, so selection was limited.

Things changed again almost immediately. Space, or lack thereof, forced many a consumer to ditch the stereo amp, and demand a one-box solution to home-theater amplification. After all, an amp/processor combination was still *double* the boxes of a receiver-based system. So, the five-channel amplifier was born. And it has flourished.

For a short time, this seemed like the ticket, but then things changed again. THX Surround EX, DTS-ES, and several proprietary 6.1 implementations came into being, which added even more

speakers to the back of our rooms. All of a sudden we needed six channels. Oh wait! Actually we need *two* center surrounds, so make that *seven* channels.

“The PVA 7’s fleet-of-foot nature maintained the recording’s quality with ease ... immediate and instantaneous sound ... kept pace with complex soundtrack material ... detail was preserved intact. ... excellent impact and transient speed.”

But, as we learned early on, it takes more than just discrete channels of amplification to make a first-rate multi-channel amplifier—the amp should deliver real power and slam, or those reference-level explosions will sound like wet paper bags popping.

LUCKY SEVEN

Power is of crucial importance to a home theater, so any power amp designed for A/V purposes must produce massive amounts of honest, clean power. That takes a hefty power supply. The Anthem PVA 7’s power supply is comprised of a single, large, 800VA custom-built toroidal transformer and 100,000 microfarads of filter capacitance, which feeds all seven channels.

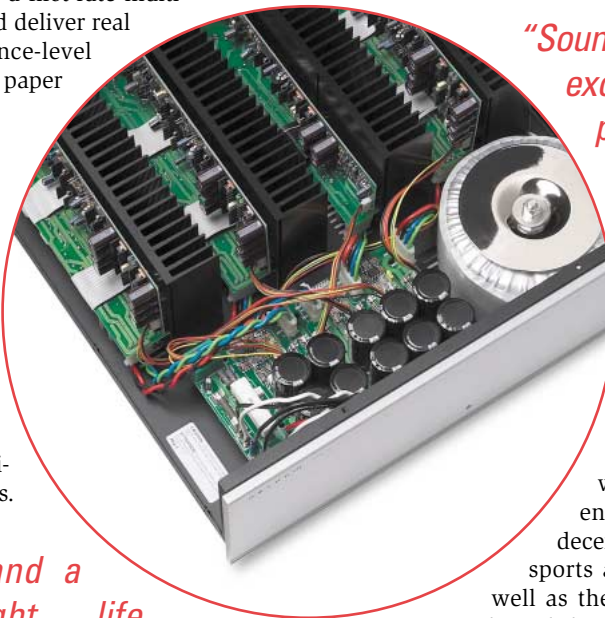
“... plenty of detail and a guttural sense of weight ... life and intensity ... impressively powerful. ... sense of ease and detail ... truly live and inviting ...”

Opinion is divided as to whether it’s better to have a single large power supply common to all channels or independent, smaller supplies for the individual channels. Anthem believes a single, large supply better supports the dynamic peaks that individual channels see during soundtrack playback, but that rarely occur simultaneously in all channels. This single core is responsible for the Anthem’s 125W rating into one channel, which drops a negligible amount, to 105W, when all channels are driven simultaneously (8 ohms). Into 4 ohms, the Anthem will reportedly do 200W into one channel and 140W to all of ‘em at the same time.

All this power could be dangerous, so, in order to protect the PVA 7’s output devices, Anthem devised the ALM™ (Advanced Load Monitoring) system, which monitors heat buildup as well as voltage and current levels. According to Anthem, this

ensures a long, stable life for the PVA 7, while not affecting audio performance (it does its work entirely out of the signal path). For those interested in specs, Anthem rates the PVA 7 as having a 122-dB signal-to-noise ratio, which is a *remarkable* number.

The PVA 7 boasts plenty of nice design features in addition to the power supply and protection circuitry. Bipolar transistors—28 of ‘em (four per channel)—are mounted on heatsinks computer-modeled for speedy heat dissipation. Military-spec FR-4 epoxy circuit boards carry the audio signals in a clean-looking layout—no small feat when seven channels are packed into one chassis. And speaking of the chassis, you get a heavy-gauge steel cabinet with an attractive aluminum faceplate. My sample was silver, which I found to be a nice, confidence-inspiring touch.



“Soundstaging and focus — was excellent. ... vocals — were planted firmly on center. ... good midrange clarity ... realistic ... dynamic and lively ...”

The back panel is further evidence that the PVA 7 was well thought-out and implemented. The binding posts are staggered (in a up-down zigzag shape) along with the RCA inputs, so that there is enough space to actually connect decent-gauge speaker wire. The PVA 7 sports an auto on/off and 12V trigger, as well as the usual power button on the front panel. And that’s about all there is to report. After all, amps should be beefy and attractive, but shouldn’t have bells and whistles galore.

The Anthem PVA 7 fits the bill. Once hook-up to your system is complete, just tap the small circular power button on the front and away you go.

SEVENS WILD

The Anthem PVA 7 sounded punchy and quick upon first listen with *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*. The pod-race scene (chapters 20-22) let the PVA 7 shine when driving Von Schweikert speakers, extracting plenty of detail and a guttural sense of weight from the racers. The engines roared with life and intensity, and that made the scene work well from a sonic standpoint. I was using the system in a 5.1 configuration at this point, and as the sound panned around the room, it was evident that each speaker was getting everything it needed to reproduce the soundtrack fully. The sound certainly did not lack power or substance at all—it sounded *impressively* powerful.

The sense of ease and detail remained intact as I slowed things down a bit to listen to The Eagles’ *Hell Freezes Over* on

DVD. Don Henley’s vocals were remarkably free of grain, giving the performance a truly live and inviting feel. The guitar work throughout this concert exhibited the texture I know is present on this disc, which showed that the Anthem was not masking or veiling the performance. While there wasn’t quite the ultimate air present around each instrument that I’ve heard from much more expensive amplifiers, I had a hard time believing I was listening to an amp under \$1500. All this great sound—and I still had two channels to spare!

“... the Anthem could easily handle the format, and seven speakers, without losing control. This is pretty incredible.”

Soundstaging and focus on two-channel recordings, such as Steve Earle’s “Copperhead Road” (*Essential Steve Earle* [MCAD-10749]), was excellent. When the vocals came in after the intro, they were planted firmly on center. This characteristic focus, when coupled with good midrange clarity, made for a realistic sonic experience. The PVA 7 presented the rest of the album with a surprisingly dynamic and lively feel.

The same immediate sound was present on David Chesky’s DVD-Audio recording of Bucky Pizzarelli’s *Swing Live*. This recording sounds about as live as any multichannel mix I’ve heard outside of some select orchestral master tapes. The PVA 7’s fleet-of-foot nature maintained the recording’s quality with ease when driving my system in four-channel mode. *Immediate* and *instantaneous* sound was what I heard.

The PVA 7 kept pace with complex soundtrack material like *The Last Castle*. Although I really didn’t care for the movie, the DTS soundtrack is fine. In the prison-yard fight scene (chapter 3), there is a cast-iron weight thrown onto a concrete slab. There is a distinctive *ring* that cuts through the rap music occupying the background. With the Anthem anchoring the system, the scene’s detail was preserved intact. The explosions later in the same movie, when the helicopter crashes to the ground, were delivered with excellent impact and transient speed.

Of course, the true test of the Anthem came when driving seven speakers during playback of a Dolby Surround EX

soundtrack. Going back again to *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*, I heard complete envelopment using the eight-piece Von Schweikert speaker ensemble I had on hand, and this at healthy, though not outrageous sound-pressure levels. Admittedly, the 7.1 system was not set up as comfortably as I would have liked (my room is suited more to a 5.1 configuration), but the sound of the pods racing whirled around me, illustrating that the Anthem could easily handle the format, and seven speakers, without losing control. This is pretty incredible.

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SEVEN ON SEVEN

The Anthem PVA 7 is rated at 125W. The \$3800 Denon AVR-5800 receiver is rated at 170W (into seven channels), which *appears to be* a fairly substantial increase. Surprisingly, I’m here to tell you that it doesn’t sound like an increase at all. I pressed into service a well-broken-in AVR-5800 I borrowed from a buddy and discovered the PVA 7 sounded every bit as powerful, dynamic, and crystalline. In fact, the Anthem’s upper treble was even purer and its bass was just as tight and well defined as the Denon’s when reproducing *The Last Castle* on DVD. The Anthem’s sound could actually be considered an upgrade to the Denon, based on its high-frequency superiority. It was that good.

I like the flexibility of having a separate power amp in my system, which raises an interesting point. You could get something like the moderately priced Denon AVR-3802 and pair it with the PVA 7 (using the Denon’s preamp outputs) for well over a thousand dollars *less* than the AVR-5800. While it’s true there would be some processing differences, the sound would likely be comparable. Many folks are using value-oriented receivers as alternatives to stand-alone processors these days, because frankly, you can save some substantial money without sacri-



ficing much of anything. When a combo like this costs much less than a top-of-the-line receiver, that's clear evidence of extraordinary value. For state-of-the-art processing, you could always go for Anthem's own outstanding AVM 20 surround-sound processor that I just reviewed, but that's another story.

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SEVENTH HEAVEN

What's the verdict? Listening to the Anthem PVA 7 in a stereo configuration was a treat. In fact, I'd even say it's priced fairly as a *two-channel* amp. Shop around. Paying this much for two high-quality channels of amplification in a well-built chassis is not a bad deal at all. However, it's not reasonable to buy it like this and have all those other channels go to waste. But in a 5.1 or 6.1 system, the picture changes. It's a *definite* bargain even when one or two channels aren't being used. You'll be hard-pressed to match everything it gives you for the same price. The home-theater performance with Dolby Digital/DTS film soundtracks and music listening with DVD-Audio recordings were both exceptional. I could see consumers getting it for this type of system and having an expansion path for later if they purchase a 7.1-compatible processor.

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When you take into consideration that you actually get *seven* channels of amplification for this price—*oh my!*—that's incredible from a standpoint of both performance *and* value. So, if you're implementing a 7.1 system, or want an expansion path for the future, you've got a monster deal on your hands in the Anthem PVA 7.