

The Highland Audio Oran 4301 Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom



Hi-Fi+ has a reputation – not entirely undeserved – as the champion of high-end hi-fi. But sometimes (depressingly often?) those high-end price tags are beyond reach. What happens then? Is hi-fi elitist? Or, is there audiophile life below £25,000?

Of course. Like most luxury goods, there has to be an economical starting point. A place where the sensibilities of the high-end apply, even if the price tags do not. Surprisingly, the nursery slopes to the high-end begin oh so mildly. They, perhaps, begin here with the Highland Audio Oran 4301 ('perhaps' simply because every day it seems that another two dozen budget loudspeakers are launched and perhaps tomorrow's super-budget starlet will change the face of the budget speaker market). As you might expect from the name, Highland Audio comes from, er, France (well, if Christopher Lambert can play a Scotsman in *Highlander*, I suppose there is a connection). It's a diminutive rear-ported two-way speaker, seemingly finished in a real wood veneer that approximates a dark cherry wood (there's a walnut and piano black option, too – as well as an even cheaper vinyl version). The front baffle is a moulded black affair, and the grilles (remove them at all costs when playing music) give the speakers a businesslike look. Then there are the WBT-like bi-wire connectors. That's right... big, chunky, Anglo-Saxon man-grade connectors at the back – these are rare on speakers costing £1,500, let alone £250.

The dimensions limit the bass, because they limit the size of the bass driver itself. The 100mm mid-bass cone features ceramic bonded to spun aluminium and is only 0.15mm thick. Not that it matters in today's flat screen world, but this bass unit is magnetically shielded. Very clever, but it still puts a lower limit of just 65Hz to the bottom end. The top end is delivered by a grille-protected

▶ 25mm titanium dome tweeter, which features a neodymium magnet. Like those big connectors, this bespeaks a far more expensive speaker than the price tag suggests.

Highland thought to sink a quartet of M6 screw threads in the bottom of the speaker. These are useful if you want to spike the speaker and mount it to a bookshelf, and also help when connecting it to the dedicated stand, which is clever, but don't expect miracles. The single central triangular pillar hides a cable management system (a hole at the back and a cavity running through the stand), and the whole thing is put together using half a dozen small screws. The downside is that the stand is made of black-coated MDF and isn't the last word in rigidity. But, the combination of bolting the speaker to the stand and sticky pads means it is locked tight. Too tight; you are more likely to rip the threads off the speaker than separate the top plate from its base once stuck.

There's a strange thing about this speaker; like some high-end models it takes time to warm up... not just the breaking in hours, but every time you use it from cold. Give it half an hour of playing each time it lays fallow and it's fully warmed up, but this could give it a poor showing in demonstration.

Which is a shame, because this is a sweet little speaker from the outset, and it gets even sweeter after that half-hour has expired. It's mostly mid-band – bass is not really an issue when a drive unit is this small – and the high frequencies are not as rip-roaringly energetic as you might expect from a budget speaker, but this is a wholly good thing under the circumstances. Too many of its peers go for the sledge-hammer approach, boosting upper bass, to give an impression of deep bass at the expense

of speed and accuracy. The Oran is very different, and it sounds fast and clean as a result.

Best of all, that mid-band is really tidy. Voices are rendered extremely well, with a sense of naturalness that's normally the preserve of much more expensive loudspeakers. This also helps give the Highland

good

Also, compared to speakers that have better extension at both ends of the spectrum, it can sounds sat on and almost muted. It's not a 'room-filler', the sound staying quite small in even medium-sized rooms. If pushed, it can fall into brightness and aggression (the tweeter lies in wait, but wick it up and it can get angry). But, as a complete package it rarely sounds incoherent and used within its range

it's a wonderfully engaging and direct performer.

This is an exciting speaker because it's a high-end springboard. What it does right, it does very right: what it does wrong is, well, forgivable given the size and the price. With that sort of groundwork in place, the Highland Oran buyer is more likely to upgrade along the right lines. It's like someone buying a cheap, but fundamentally decent, automatic watch, instead of an all-singing, all-dancing affair: you just know that one day, the next wristwatch is going to be something bigger and better. So, that's what we have here: essentially training wheels for a Sonus Faber. ➤



soundstaging. Images move wide of the boxes, with some image depth, although they lack the solidity to appear rooted and there's some slight veiling of position in the soundstage.

Let's not get carried away, here. The Highland Audio design is not without its limitations. The combination of relatively low efficiency and power handling mean you don't go loud.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Oran 4301

Type:	Two-way bass-reflex
Drivers:	25mm Titanium dome tweeter 100mm metal/ceramic cone mid-bass driver
Sensitivity:	84 db
Impedance:	6 ohms
Bandwidth:	65 Hz - 20 kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	127 x 230 x 210 mm
Weight :	3 kg each
Finishes:	Wood veneer or piano black lacquer finish
Price:	£240

Manufacturer:

Highland Audio

Net. www.highland-audio.com