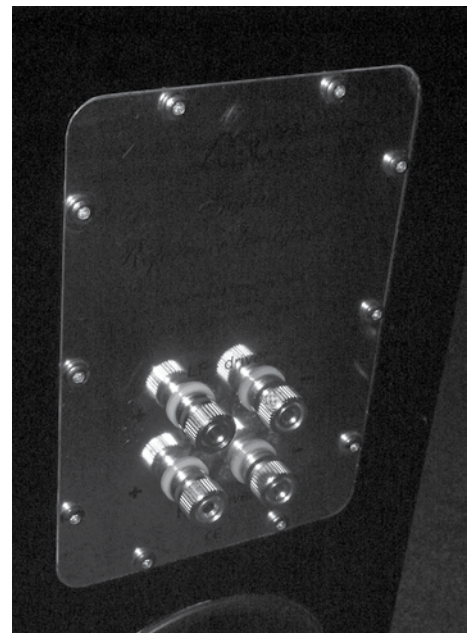




face inward (we double-checked, because we had our doubts), which means that, if you install equipment between them, it will get plenty rattled. We wouldn't want to position them too close to a turntable, or even a TV set! We should add that the Genius 400 may actually be used in some home theatre systems, since ASW also makes a centre channel speaker.

This is a three-way speaker. The chromed panel at the front holds two 12 cm carbon fibre midrange speakers and a textile dome tweeter. An oval grille is supplied. The usual advice is not to use grilles unless you have young children, because the performance hit is always considerable. Accordingly, we set them up *sans* grilles in our Omega system. We quickly had second thoughts. We then recalled that, when we had used the ASW's at the Montreal show, we had left the grilles on. *Why was that?* This is not a small tweak. With the grilles, the tonality is wonderfully lifelike. Take them off and the spectral balance goes way off in what we consider to be the wrong direction.

The base of the speaker is bolted on, and there are nicely machined screw-in cones. They have no locking nuts, though, which means that if you unscrew one in order to level the speaker, it will be free to wobble. The four gold-plated binding posts (shown below), like the front drivers, are mounted in a heavy chromed plate. Those binding posts aren't as good as they look, however,



LISTENING ROOM

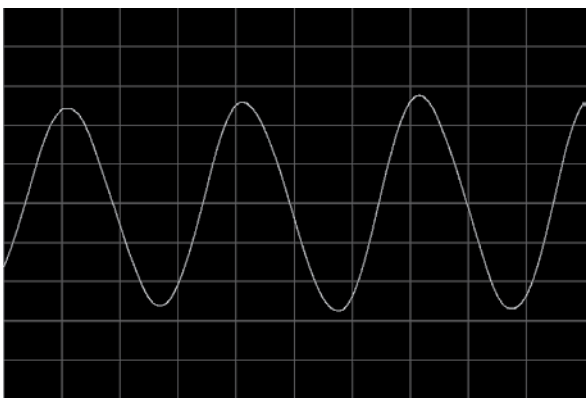
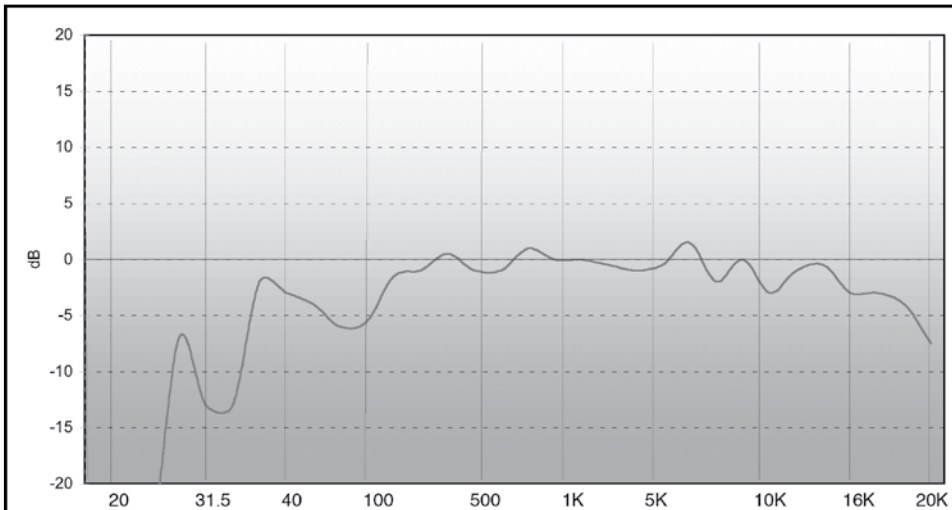
# ASW GENIUS 400

If you're like us, you expect German speakers to be unreasonably expensive. Heck, a German *cup of coffee* is unreasonably expensive by the standards even of other European countries. There is no shortage of high-tech German speakers, but affordable ones...that's another matter.

Not that everyone considers nearly C\$5000 to be affordable, but as we

shall see, these are good value. And the Genius 400 is only one of a whole family of models, though it is the most expensive.

The speaker is tall and slim, a lot deeper than it is wide. The narrow profile allows a better projection of the stereo image, and the depth gives room for a 25 cm side-mounted woofer, ported at the rear. ASW says the woofers should



clarity that is accompanied by a liveliness and a lightness (in the best sense) that made the experience highly enjoyable. Background instruments — and there are lots of them in this recording — were clear to the point of being hyper-realistic. The music's good humor came through well.

Reine, however, reserved judgement, and we concluded that all was not well. It was with this recording that we did our adjustments, in volume, in placement, and of course in grille installation. Once we were satisfied that the Genius 400's were going to sound their best, we listened again to the *Façade* recording from the top.

With everything now satisfactory, we proceeded to the second selection, the band arrangement of the suite from the musical *A Chorus Line*. This is from the Dallas Wind Symphony's *Beachcomber* double LP (Reference Recordings RR-62). It's loaded with brass and woodwinds, and especially with percussion — part way through there is a tympani solo that never fails to shut off conversation.

The ASW's brought the music in with a bang, which Gerard thought might actually be exaggerated. The textures of the brass instruments were superb, the rhythm light and quick. The depth was well rendered, and the stereo image was especially excellent. That tympani? Impressive! Even the piccolo sounded good, somewhat smoother than the one in *Façade*.

We had only good comments about *Comes Love*, a jazz piece from the Opus 3 *Showcase* album (LP20000). The instruments in this joyous piece are gorgeously recorded, and the speakers reproduced them with plausibility and brio. The clarinet was remarkably warm and woody, the piano superb, and the soubaphone solid and humorous. Beyond the sound of each instrument, however, it was the balance that we found so pleasant. We rather imagined that the ensemble must have sounded about like this in the studio.

Then over to a Blues piece we often use, Eric Bibb's *Good Stuff* from the album of the same name (Opus 3 LP19603). This LP was cut at 45 rpm and pressed in unusually good (and thick!) vinyl. Properly reproduced, it is a model of what you can do with analog.

And the ASW's did reproduce it properly. We noticed the rhythm first of all. Poor reproduction of rhythm is quite common in speakers, and it is especially endemic in larger speakers. Not these. Despite the extended low-frequency response, the rhythm remained quick and light. Bibb's voice was clear and natural, well separated from the accompanying instruments. "The percussion is remarkable," commented Reine.

We ended the session with our long time speaker killer, *Secret of the Andes*, which we ran from LP, though the same music is available on the *Audiophile* xrcd. The first half of what is essentially a piano-centred jazz piece, is an extended sequence for Central American instruments, heavy on the percussion. A speaker with an inadequately-damped cabinet will make all the drums resemble each other, whether they are wood, metal, or stretched skin. By now we expected the Genius 400's to do well on this recording.

Actually it did better than "well." The percussion sequence was as neutral as it had been with our reference speakers, and we admired the quickness of the many transients. The dynamics bordered on explosive. There was a veritable cascade of drums and other percussion instruments that was impressive to listen to.

The second half of the piece worked well too. Victor Feldman's piano, which

and they won't hold either spades or bare wires tight. We recommend using bananas with these binding posts, or else getting better posts installed (the second choice is the better one). Our speakers were finished in a flawless piano gloss, which adds a premium to the price of the natural wood finishes.

Once we had figured out the thing about the grilles, we set up the speakers, initially in the same position as our Reference 3a Suprema speakers. After a first listen we pushed them back slightly, but not too close to the wall, having due regard for that large port in the rear. To make the Genius 400's sound like our speakers, we dropped the volume by just over 1 dB. That's in line with ASW's sensitivity rating for these speakers which, at 93 dB, is 2 dB higher than that of ours.

We used five of our favorite LPs for this session, and...we may as well tell you right off that we had a great time.

The first was William Walton's amazing tone poem *Façade*, played flawlessly by the Chicago Pro Musica. We were struck by the clarity of these speakers,



for some reason poses problems for the same speakers that stumble on the percussion, sounded attractive and plausible. The kick drum was excellent. All in all, it was an impressive finish.

In case we haven't mentioned it, we were running the volume quite loud, taking full advantage of the power available from our Moon W-5LE amplifier. The ASW's were clearly at ease with that power, and with the size of our Omega room.

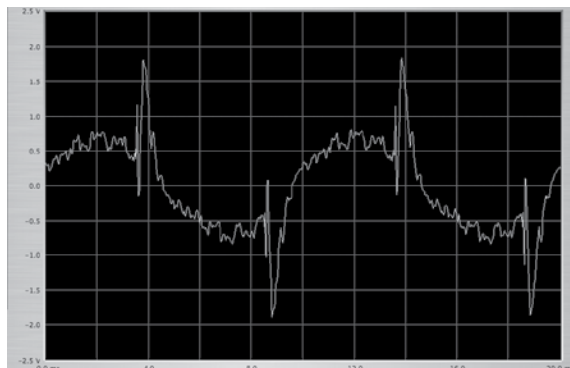
All that was left was the battery of technical tests. Though we usually do speaker tests in the controlled environment of our Alpha room, these speakers are a little large for that room, and so we used the Omega system in this case.

The frequency response, measured at one meter, at a reference level of 100 dB using third of octave warble tones, is shown at upper left on the previous page. If we ignore the pronounced dips around 35 and 80 Hz, which are due to room effects rather than the speaker themselves, the curve is impressive. Even at this high volume, the low-frequency output is unusually clean. The sine wave shown on the previous page was measured *at a frequency of 31.5 Hz!* It's

not often you'll see results like that.

Over the rest of the range, the speaker behaves very well, with especially smooth response through the often troublesome range between 1 kHz and 5 kHz. There is a gentle rolloff at the top end, with no bothersome anomalies.

As usual, we fed a 100 Hz square wave into the speaker at a level of 100 dB as measured from the microphone position, one meter in front of the speaker, on line with the



tweeter. The wave, shown above, is quite well-formed. The doubling of the riser is a by-product of the distance between the side-mounted woofer and the twin midrange drivers.

Using the Genius 400's at the Montreal show had left us with a good feeling about them, and that feeling was fully reinforced by our experience with our reference system. What impressed us most was how few limitations are imposed on it by its design. It has all the volume you could ever want, its bottom end goes down to bedrock, and its top end is delightfully smooth...at least if you don't lose the cloth grilles. Whatever music you favor, these speakers can make it sound great.



### SUMMING IT UP...

**Brand/model:** ASW Genius 400  
**Price:** C\$4900 in most finishes  
**Dimensions:** 17 x 42 x 116.5 cm  
**Sensitivity:** 93 dB  
**Impedance:** 4 ohms  
**Most liked:** Neutral balance, good balance, extended bottom end  
**Least liked:** Sensitivity to placement, poor binding posts  
**Verdict:** If BMW made speakers, this would be one of them

## CROSSTALK

The first thing I noticed was their *speed*. It would be logical to assume that speakers are as fast as the signal they receive and, yet, in this case, it felt as if the speakers anticipated what was coming up, reacting instantly with a burst of musical fireworks. They thrived on complex percussion lines, exploding with virtuosity and exposed the most minute sound textures. They also loved voices, rendering the warmth and the vibrato as clearly as they carved the lyrics in the air, among the instruments.

For those who are used to a soft-edged-smooth-as-honey type of sound in your system, listen to these speakers and hear the life in your music for the first time. "You mean, no more yawns?" That's right. And no idle chatter, either.

—Albert Simon

Ever notice how a country's loudspeakers tend to have the same sort of sound. British: mellow and warm. French: ultra-precise, etched. Canada: warm, tight,

extended. USA: depends on whether you mean the East Coast or the West Coast. Germany: spectacular, glitzy.

But in recent years we've moved away from the stereotypes. These speakers are German, and they may be spectacular, but they are decidedly not glitzy. There's a lot of detail, but it's not synthetic, and it never gets annoying. I've spent a lot of time listening to these speakers, and I was never tempted to turn them off. Yes, I know that at this price you should be able to take this for granted.

When we had the Genius 400's at the show, visitors expressed surprise at how low the price was considering the sound, the finish, and the country of origin. I agree. These are fine speakers in every way.

—Gerard Rejskind

So neat looking with its sumptuous piano finish, as svelte and elegant as a Top Model, these speakers came through a tough test session with honors.

They show, with no cheating, an enviable spectral balance. What's more, thanks to the spaciousness of the sound, they give each instrument room to breathe, and at the same time they involve us in rhythms that vary from gentle to frenetic.

In my view, rhythm is the speakers' strongest point, but they offer more than just rhythm. The quick attacks and the fast stops add to the feeling of depth and separation. The textures of voices and instruments are warm, rich and delightful, and the sensitivity of the musicians finds a path to our hearts.

Nothing escapes unnoticed: dynamics, trills, modulations, inflections, eloquence. Add to all of this the impressive way percussion comes through, and counterpoints so clear you can make out all its layers.

Of course all of this is true only if you keep the grilles on, but that's actually a plus for an audiophile who believes that speakers should not spoil the décor.

—Reine Lessard