

# The Music Trades

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# NAMM SPECIAL BLUE SKIES AHEAD?

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HIGH-VALUE  
GUITAR LINES

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## LÂG Guitars Come To The U.S.

Korg Puts Major Marketing Muscle Behind The Launch Of A  
Unique New Line Of French Acoustic Guitars

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MAKER WITH  
A DIFFERENT  
STRATEGY

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# LÂG Brings “Haute Couture” To Acoustic Guitars

After two decades of building exquisite custom instruments, master luthier Michel Lâg-Chavarria is aiming at a broader market with competitively priced Lag acoustics backed by a hard-hitting marketing campaign from Korg



**W**hen master luthier Michel Lâg-Chavarria calls his new LÂG Tramontane acoustic guitars “haute couture instruments,” it prompts some serious head scratching. The French term for “high fashion,” usually brings to mind images of skinny models prancing down runways, not fine guitars. As he elaborates though, this unorthodox description begins to make sense. “Haute couture simply means using the best materials and the best designs brought together to create a thing of beauty,” he says. “That’s what we’ve done with our new guitars.”

U.S. retailers will be able to assess “haute couture” guitars for themselves when the Tramontane (pronounced Trah-mon-tahn) guitar line makes its debut at the Korg USA exhibit at NAMM. (Korg has been tapped as the exclusive U.S. distributor.) Named for a seasonal wind that brings balmy weather to Southern France, the line includes more than 50 steel string and nylon string models in three basic series that address all playing styles and popular price points. In designing the

Tramontane line, Lâg-Chavarria stayed well within the boundaries of acoustic guitar conventions. His dreadnought, auditorium, and jumbo body shapes, as well as his construction methods, reflect a century of guitar making tradition. Yet, at the same time, the Tramontane guitars achieve a distinctive style. A sculpted headstock, with a logo inlaid in white oak and an exotic wood rosette, adorned with the Occitane Cross, the symbol of Lâg-Chavarria’s home region, make the guitars instantly recognizable. “We aimed for a balance,” states Lâg-Chavarria. “Unique character, but with broad appeal.”

Korg USA will be backing the new guitars with a comprehensive marketing program that combines heavy consumer advertising in print and in alternative medias, a far-reaching artist endorsement effort, and hard-hitting retail point-of-purchase support materials. “Korg is a company that builds brands,” said Mitch Colby, Korg USA chief marketing officer. “We put our energy into a limited number of unique, high-quality product lines and make them market leaders. We’ve made Korg electronics and Marshall amplifiers into iconic brands, and since 1992 we’ve rebuilt Vox into a global pow-



*LÂG acoustic guitars, designed in France, will make their NAMM debut. The line addresses top-selling styles and price points.*

erful brand. LÂG guitars are the perfect complement to our existing product lineup. There is a lot of passion behind the product, the quality and attention to detail is outstanding, and we are confident that they will become an important factor in the market very quickly.”

Although LÂG acoustic guitars are relatively new to the U.S., in the past three years the brand has emerged as one of the top sellers throughout Europe. This success is the result the complementary talents of partners Lâg-Chavarria and Gerard Garnier, founder and CEO of Algam, France’s largest distributor.



An inspired luthier, for the past 25 years, Lâg-Chavarria has crafted breathtakingly beautiful guitars for some of Europe's most prominent musicians. His instruments are distinguished by over-the-top attention to detail and the use of extraordinary exotic woods. A professional guitarist with a passion for the Beatles (his knowledge of their song catalog and recordings is frighteningly encyclopedic), Lâg-Chavarria began repairing guitars in 1978 to augment his income as a performer. His reputation spread far beyond his home town of Toulouse, and in 1981 he set up a small shop and began manufacturing the first LÂG guitars. He received a big break in 1985 when he befriended Marcel Dadi, the late French fingerstyle virtuoso. Dadi became an enthusiastic supporter of the LÂG line, promoting them in his Paris retail store and using them in concert. "I owe an incredible debt to him," states Lâg-Chavarria.

Garnier started his career in 1972 manufacturing unusual ethnic folk instruments under the Camac brand. To help support his manufacturing operations, a few years later he began distributing conventional musical instruments and accessories. As it became increasingly difficult to simultaneously fund growing manufacturing and distribution businesses, in 1994 Garnier sold the Camac instrument business to his brother Joel and focused his energies on the Algam distribution business. With boundless energy and a natural flair for marketing, he built Algam into the undisputed leader in the French market. The company's three divisions distribute top product lines including Korg, Vox, Behringer, Marshall, Alesis, Numark, Shure, Samson, and numerous others.

### **A POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP**

Garnier initially invested in LÂG guitars in 2002 to help Lâg-Chavarria better market his high-end electric products in Europe. Initially, the two had no thought of expanding the LÂG product line, for fear of potential conflicts with the guitar lines Algam was distributing, including Gibson, Takamine, and Taylor. However, as major guitar brands began taking over their European distribution, the two decided the time was right to leverage the LÂG prestige into



*Michel Lâg-Chavarria has spent almost three decades handcrafting exquisite guitars in his shop in Bedarieux, France. His instruments are characterized by the use of exceptional woods, like spalted maple, above.*

a broader-based product line.

Based on several decades in the distribution business, Garnier brings a detailed knowledge of the market to the partnership. From his early days at Camac he also has an appreciation of

the challenges of manufacturing. Lâg-Chavarria supplies that artist's eye and the luthier's craft. In bringing their product concept to market, they could have farmed out production to one of the larger Asian contract manufacturers.



A joint effort between LÂG, Algam of France, and Korg USA, Lag guitars will be aggressively marketed in the U.S. (l-r) Mike Bradley, Korg marketing director; Gerard Garnier, CEO, Algam, France; Michel Lâg-Chavarria; Mitch Colby, Korg USA chief marketing officer; Benjamin Garnier, Lag product manager; Joe Castronovo, president, Korg USA.

However, they ultimately decided to take a different and more challenging approach.

The high-end LÂG guitars are produced in an immaculate single-story shop, nestled among ancient limestone chapels and monasteries in Bedarieux, a scenic farming village in the Occitania region of southern France. A thousand years ago, Occitania was a loose but powerful confederation of states that included parts of Northern Spain, Southern France, and Italy and was noted for its long forgotten Occ language, religious tolerance, and artistic achievement. Although it's little more than a name on map today, Lâg-Chavarria says Occitania and its unique spirit continue to inspire his guitar building. How can something as elusive as the spirit of a long-vanquished medieval state influence a 21st century guitar maker? He explains, "Borders and politics have changed, but Occitania is still about a love for beauty, an appreciation that the small details are what determine quality, and a will-

ingness to use all your senses. That's how we build guitars, and that's why the Tramontane guitars have an Occitania cross in the rosette. It's not a religious symbol, it's a symbol of everything that's wonderful in the area."

Inside the LÂG plant in Bedarieux, the evidence of this Occitanian spirit can be seen in meticulous craftsmanship at every stage of the manufacturing process. Lâg-Chavarria goes to great lengths to secure exquisite figured woods from all over the globe—flame and quilted maple, spault maple, wildly figured birch, as well as variety of exotic African species. Similar effort is expended in transforming these select woods into fine instruments. Although CNC machines are used to shape body and neck parts, the finishing operations are painstakingly done by hand. Whether it's installing frets or sanding a lacquer finish, the craftsmen at LÂG fuss over the smallest details that would go unnoticed by all but the most discerning user. Lâg-Chavarria explains, "Every piece of wood is unique. To

build a fine guitar that takes advantage of the character of the wood, there is no substitute for hand work."

#### **CUSTOM SHOP TRADITION**

The LÂG Bedarieux operation is more a custom shop than a factory, turning out about 70 unique guitars a month. Most of the instruments are solid body electrics, and almost all of them are special orders. Lâg-Chavarria takes special pride in being able to build anything a customer asks for, regardless of how complex. "Some of the requests we get may take a little longer, but we build them all," he says. The factory also serves as the R&D laboratory for the new acoustic line. The task of translating design concepts hatched in Bedarieux into large scale production falls to Kurt Hendrick, LÂG's Asian director of manufacturing.

A luthier in his own right, Hendrick has lived an itinerant existence for the past 25 years, running guitar plants in Korea, China, and India and supplying instruments to most of the world's



LÂG guitars are distinguished by a inlaid rosette with the "Oc" cross, the symbol of France's Occitane region; proprietary electronics, developed with Shadow of Germany; and distinctive woods.

major guitar brands. Having designed several guitar plants from the ground up, he has hard-won insights into what it takes to build a quality guitar in Asia that few can match. Summing up this experience, he says simply, "if you want the job done right, you have to do it yourself." That's why LÂG guitars are built exclusively in an Algam-owned plant in Dongguan, China. Hendrick explains, "It would have been faster and easier to just hand production over to a contract manufacturer. But when you do that, the product you get is what they want to build, not what you necessarily want."

Based on years of experience working in China, Hendrick also has established sources for all materials and components, which is no small feat. Knowing where to go to procure glue, plastic for pickguards, and finishing material can mean the difference between sub-par and superlative instruments.

This slower and more painstaking approach to production is reflected in a broad product line with a host of distinctive features. The entry LÂG Standard Series is designed to retail profitably between \$280 and \$400 and

is produced with a laminated spruce top and mahogany back and sides. Available in dreadnought and auditorium styles, it is distinguished by a low profile neck and distinctive wood trim binding. The mid-priced Stage Series, with prices ranging between \$500 and \$900, features striking solid red cedar tops, similar to those favored by the most renowned Spanish guitar makers, and bodies of either mahogany or rosewood. Dreadnought, auditorium, and jumbo body styles are available. The top-of-the-line Master Series features more elegant trim and triple A spruce tops. Both Master and Stage series are available in either conventional high-gloss finish or a unique thin "French Satin" finish. Somewhere in between satin and a high-gloss finish, the French Satin "provides a special tonal quality," says Lâg-Chavarria. (The Stage and Standard series will be available for immediate shipment following the NAMM show. The Master series will be available later in the year.)

Lâg-Chavarria is particularly proud of the LÂG nylon stringed guitars. Although they have a fan bracing pattern similar to those found on fine clas-

sical instruments, they boast a neck shape and body style that are more familiar to steel string players. "They are unique instruments that stand on their own," he says.

#### NOT AN AVERAGE GUITAR

Electric/Acoustic models are available with either the DirectLâg or the StudioLâg preamp systems, developed in collaboration with Shadow electronics. The StudioLag contains five custom-configured analog presets that make it easier to achieve an ideal tone on stage or in the studio.

Korg management recognizes that a guitar with a French lineage is untried in an already crowded acoustic marketplace. Mike Bradley, director of marketing, views this novelty aspect as more of an opportunity than a challenge. "We're working to capture the romance of France and blend it with American culture in a way that cuts through," he explains. "We're not positioning this as just another 'warm, woody' instrument. It will stand out, and we're confident that it will find acceptance."

[www.lagguitars.com](http://www.lagguitars.com)