The Indigenization of Church Music: Issues in Orthodox Ethnomusicology

AmandaEve Wigglesworth

Ethnomusicology is "...the field of study that joins the concerns and methods of anthropology with the study of music."[1] Among other things, ethnomusicologists explore the relationships between music and identity, culture, religion, and politics. They ask basic questions like "What is music?" and "What instruments are used in which contexts?" to identify how a people group views and uses music within its culture. The ethnomusicologists' quest is to determine the answer to one fundamental yet multi-faceted question: *Who* sings/plays *what* to *whom*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*?

The ethnomusicologist may be interested in the answer to the above question for a variety of reasons. For some, this is merely an exercise in observation – a way to record and preserve one element of a minority culture. For others, the answer helps them to work alongside indigenous people groups to develop religious music that reflects their culture. A joyful melody to one person can sound like a funeral dirge to another. Gender roles can affect who is allowed to compose texts or melodies, play those melodies, or sing those texts.

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[1] Kay Kaufman Shelemay. *Soundscapes: Exploring Music in a Changing World.* 2nd edition. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2006), p. 6.

Ethnomusicologists who work with SIL International work alongside communities to learn how they define music, and how music fits within the scope of their culture. By observing, inquiring, and participating, the specialists learn the answers to their questions and can enable the creation of new songs in addition to the translation of existing hymns into the local language. The results can be extraordinary and can come about in unexpected ways.

In Ghana, when an SIL music research team organized a workshop to discuss the creation of a local religious music style, they were blessed with spontaneous results:

> ...the missionaries began asking about [the people group's][2] song genres, and discussed with the people which genres might be appropriate for use in the church. After the people chose some suitable genres, the missionaries asked someone to read a short Bible verse. Soon, a woman tried singing the words of the verse, and the other women joined in with a response line almost immediately. Another verse was read, and the women did it again! Now everyone was paying close attention. Another verse was read, and the men had a go at a different song genre. By now, some of the instruments had arrived, so they were added to the mix. Someone got up to dance, then others joined in, and soon all the people were doing the circle dance with incredible joy and glorious song filling the room. It was a truly amazing moment, to be present at the very beginning of [their] indigenous hymnody.[3]

This example demonstrates how a people group can set Biblical texts to their own local musical style. The people were not writing their own

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[2] The name of the people group has been concealed for anonymity.

[3] Paul Neeley, Sue Hall, and Mary Hendershott. "The Beginning of Vagla Hymnody," in Neil R. Coulter, ed. *Global Experiences of God's Word and Music: Vignettes from the Mission Field.* (Dallas: SIL International, 2002), p. 1.

words, but rather were singing the words of the Bible in their own language. By singing the texts in indigenous melodies, the texts came alive and the people were responsive. When people are able to sing in both their own language and in a style that speaks to their heart, not only do they perceive that God is able to speak their own language, but they also realize that they are able to speak to Him from their own hearts instead of depending on foreign melodies that do not stir their souls.

This people group from Ghana spontaneously erupted into antiphonal singing whereby one person sang a verse and the assembly responded with a refrain. Interestingly, when a woman sang the verse, only the women in the assembly responded; when a man sang the verse, only the men responded. In a church setting, both of these cultural factors should be taken into consideration.

Styles of Orthodox Chant – An Examination of Three Methods of Executing a Text

Even though the people of Ghana discussed above are not members of the Orthodox Church, the example is still relevant in an Orthodox context. In Zimbabwe, people from the country's two major people groups have embraced Orthodoxy, but do not yet have a local chant system. During the services, both the Shona and Ndebele communities use a simplified Byzantine chant system (using the Shona, Ndebele, English, and Greek languages). However, outside of church, the women sing animated songs that include the responsorial style (the style that the people in Ghana demonstrated) – whereby a cantor sings the verses and the people respond with a refrain – as well as the canonarch style – whereby one woman sings the first few words of a phrase and the assembly responds by repeating those words and completing the phrase.

Responsorial (epiphonal), canonarchal, and antiphonal styles have all been used in Orthodox services throughout history. They originated in Jewish worship practices and continued to be effective in churches where literacy was low and copies of manuscripts were limited. The canonarch was the keeper of the precious texts. In a responsorial style, the canonarch would sing the variable texts (for example, the psalm verses) and the assembly would respond with a refrain. In the canonarchal style, the canonarch would sing the first few words softly to prompt the choir (the *kliros*). Once reminded of the words, the choir could then sing the full text with the canonarch to prompt as necessary.　Antiphonal singing consists of two choirs singing in alternation. In some churches, this is accomplished by establishing two choirs, or by dividing the men and women into separate choirs. It can also be accomplished by alternating between a cantor and a choir.[4]

At the Ecumenical Patriarchal Church of St George (Constantinople [Istanbul], Turkey), there is a senior cantor on each side (who are both slightly elevated and face each other). The other singers form a circle around their respective music stand so that there is one circle of singers on the right side of the church and another circle of singers on the left side. The two choirs alternate throughout the service and are never singing at the same time. One sings the first antiphon (responsorial style), then other sings the second antiphon, and on it goes. This model combines the antiphonal and responsorial styles.

The responsorial, canonarchal, and antiphonal styles can be used effectively in predominantly oral cultures today to revive and maintain traditional Orthodox styles of executing a text while remaining faithful

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[4] Johann von Gardner. *Russian Church Singing. Volume 1: Orthodox Worship and Hymnography.* Trans. Vladimir Morosan. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1980), pp. 31-33.

to indigenous music styles. For example, indigenous music in Zimbabwe will likely include these three styles, because the people are already familiar with them. When developing local musical settings for Orthodox texts, the people will need to become aware that their indigenous music styles are acceptable and welcome in the church.

In North America, these styles have been waning in popularity within the Orthodox Church. Why is this? There are likely many factors. One factor is that literacy rates are higher in North America now than they were in medieval Europe and Central Asia. In addition, access to print materials is easier and less expensive than it once was. It is completely feasible for each choir member to have access to the text and music (even if they are sharing 3 or 4 people to a book). Indeed, many parishes also have books available for parishioners and visitors. These books have the text of the service at minimum, but may also include sheet music and variable hymns.

Under these circumstances, the role of the prompter is no longer necessary, and in some situations, it is no longer desired or welcome. In one Canadian parish where congregational singing is practiced, a new responsorial version of a hymn was introduced. While the melodic structure of the piece was accepted, the responsorial style (a cantor singing the highly melodic psalm verses and the assembly responding with the refrain) was initially questioned as even being authentically Orthodox. The responsorial version was maintained for a couple of years at which time the congregation began joining in with the psalm verses. Today, this hymn is being sung 100% congregationally, and there are no traces of the responsorial nature of the piece (except on the sheet music).

As a result of societal change, the styles of musical execution have changed in North America. Today, in the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) parishes, one often hears a combination of choir-only

singing and congregational singing. Solo cantor, responsorial, and even antiphonal singing are not dead, but neither are they common within this branch of the Church.

Issues in Translating Music

a. Tonal Languages and Melodic Structure

Non-tonal languages convey meaning through phonetics – that is, through the sounds we produce with our oral and nasal cavities. These languages can play with pitch to add layers of meaning to their utterances. For example, English speakers raise their pitch at the end of an utterance to indicate that they are asking a question. There are particular cadences and rhythms that are overlaid on sentences. When speakers follow these patterns, their speech flows smoothly and naturally. These patterns are hard to define, but most people have experienced listening to a non-native speaker who is not following the natural speech patterns. The result alerts the listener to the fact that something is not quite right.

In contrast, tonal languages convey meaning through phonetics and pitch simultaneously. The pitch itself becomes a unit of meaning; therefore, if the same syllable is pronounced with a different pitch, the meaning of the word changes. Take a look at the following examples of minimal pairs.[5]

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[5] Minimal Pairs: two utterances that are identical except for one phonetic sound.

Non-Tonal: English		Tonal: Mandarin[6]				
/dip/	'deep'	Ba (/) [rising]	'To uproot'	Bi (/)	'Nose'
/dil/	'deal'	Ba (-) [flat]	'Eight'	Bi (-)	'force'
/pil/	'peal'	Ba (\/)[falling-rising]	'To hold'	Bi (\/)	'compare'
		Ba (\) [falling]	'A harrow'	Bi (\)	'Wall'

Figure 1. Examples of minimal pairs in English and Mandarin

The English examples show that by substituting one consonant with another, the meaning of the word changes. Likewise, the Mandarin examples show that vowel substitution can affect meaning, but they also demonstrate that the pitch – the way the syllable is pronounced – affects the meaning of the word.

The implications for choral music are significant. Non-tonal languages have considerable freedom in creating melodies. However, tonal languages require melodies that align with the melodic structure of the language. When non-indigenous melodies are used in tonal languages, the results can be disastrous.

For example, "…when the hymn 'Amazing Grace' was translated into Ebira, a tone language [in Africa], the meaning of the song was completely distorted. The translated words mean 'I once was blind, but now I see.' However, when the words are sung to the original melody, the meaning becomes 'I am getting blind, I do not see.'"[7]

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[6] J.C. Catford. *A Practical Introduction to Phonetics*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1988), p. 183; Chee-Lan Angelina Lo. "Learn Chinese / Mandarin in Montreal" <http://www.mandarinmontreal.com> (Date accessed: November 25, 2010.)

[7] David O. Moomo "Cultural Misunderstandings," in Neil R. Coulter, ed. *Global Experiences of God's Word and Music: Vignettes from the Mission Field.* (Dallas: SIL International, 2002), p. 34.

In the Orthodox Church, where virtually all of our texts (which proclaim the theology and history of the church passed onto us through Biblical writers and Church Fathers) are sung, the implications of worshipping in a tonal language are clear. Existing melodies from either the Byzantine or Slavic traditions are insufficient. A consistent melodic form that remains the same but is sung with different words (like a troparion tone) will distort the meaning of those texts. It cannot be assumed that different texts can be sung to the same melody. Instead, the local church will need to (painstakingly) analyze each text to determine a local tone system that works with their language in order to preserve the meanings of the texts.

While English speakers do not need to be concerned with tonal repercussions, other translation issues are quite relevant.

b. Text Translations

Other than variable hymns for North American saints, none of the texts of the Orthodox Church were written originally in English. Rather, the texts have been translated primarily from Greek and Slavonic. Whenever translating from one language into another, the translator (or translation team) will invariably confront complications.

Take, for example, the word *bowels* – "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his bowels *of compassion* from him, how does the love of God dwell in him?" (1 John 3:17). English translators translated the Greek word literally, but added "of compassion." Imagine how it would sound without that! It would bring up a disgusting and totally misleading image to the modern reader! Other English translators have replaced *bowels* with the words *heart* or *compassion* in order to clearly communicate the meaning to English readers*.*

Translators also need to consider the characteristics of the source (original) and target languages. Grammatical forms, sentence structure, discourse type, and literary genre all play a role in how the information is encoded in the source language. When that material is translated into another language, the translator needs to be aware of what the original text is saying, so that every effort can be made to communicate accurately the words and ideas in the target language. One aspect of this involves word choices, like the *bowels* example above. Another aspect is considering the social situation of both the source culture and the target culture. Here are some examples of good intentions gone awry.

> --"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God:" In Ghana, there is a fortress on the coast. It was built by the colonial powers and used to hold slaves, many of whom died before being placed on a ship. A fortress is a symbol of oppression, slavery, injustice, and death – not a good comparison with God.
> --"Peace Like a River:" In many places, rivers are infested with crocodiles and malaria-bearing mosquitoes – not peaceful places at all.
> --"Give Me that Old-Time Religion:" This could be interpreted to mean animism, ancestor veneration, and so forth – the people's original religion."[8]

These examples point out common Protestant hymns that do not convey the same universal meaning, and there are also examples from scripture that illustrate the same point. Some words or concepts may be unfamiliar to a language group. Other times, the concepts are familiar, but are understood differently. For example, in some cultures, the tax collector beating his breast (Luke 18) is understood to signify anger instead of indicating remorse.

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[8] Anonymous. "Problems with Hymn Translation," in Neil R. Coulter, ed. *Global Experiences of God's Word and Music: Vignettes from the Mission Field.* (Dallas: SIL International, 2002), p. 19.

In Mark 5, a woman fell at Jesus' feet after touching His robe, and trembled with fear. Among one people group in Papua New Guinea, this was interpreted as indicating that Jesus was about to hit or beat the woman because that is the only reason a woman in their culture would fall at a man's feet in fear. Just imagine the reaction among the people if that had been published without further clarification! The men would have said, "Praise God! Jesus is a real man, just like us!" And the women would have said, "God help us! Jesus is just like our husbands!"

A translator in North Africa was told that he was translating Matthew 7 incorrectly. He was told that it should read: "The wise man builds his house on the sand and the foolish man builds his house on the rock." In their nomadic culture, a camel-skin tent home set up on rocky ground would soon be blown away by a strong wind, while such a home set up on the sand could be firmly anchored down with pegs driven deep into the ground.

These examples of hymn and scripture translation also apply to the numerous service texts within the Orthodox Church. When a translator needs to adjust a phrase or sentence structure in order to communicate the message accurately in the target language, these changes naturally affect the musical settings because the syllable structure is no longer the same, and the words that require emphasis may now be in completely different positions within the sentence.

The Byzantine[9] tonal systems' flexibility (which results in its complexity) allows it be more adaptable to singing the same texts in another language. However, the musical structure of the Byzantine system is quite foreign to many other cultures. Although the Byzantine

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[9] Byzantine (Greek), Serbian, and Bulgarian.

music is flexible, it can be complicated and sound unnatural to many North American ears.

Slavic systems, especially Kievan and *Obikhod*, are much more natural to the Western ear. These melodies are often written in four-part harmonies, and often use simple chord structures and progressions. These melodies are much easier for the Western heart to internalize. Although the free-chant nature of these systems makes them able to accommodate a change in syllable count, these systems are less flexible than their Byzantine counterparts when it comes to placing emphasis on words since the melodic emphases are placed at the beginning and end of each melodic phrase (but the linguistic emphasis may be somewhere else in the phrase). Pairing English translations with music that was written for the Slavonic sentence structure produces a mixture of results. Sometimes, the translations seem completely natural; at other times, matching the words to the music is challenging. In some situations, the results are very awkward and do not reflect the natural rhythms of the English language, no matter how the notes are applied to the words.

c. Adapting English Words to 'Non-English' Melodies

When a piece of choral music is written, the musical structure reflects the integrity and reality of the language for which it is being written. The composer has taken into account the natural phrasing, syllable structure, and both phrasal and syllabic emphasis of the language so that the music sounds natural within that language and culture. The multicultural nature of the Orthodox Church has given rise to various musical traditions; maintaining linguistic integrity is only one reason for their development.

When the Church moved into new geographic areas, new musical traditions also arose over time. Indeed, the modern Byzantine and Slavic styles have been developing slowly over two thousand

years. The process has never been fast, but the organic indigenization of the Church has allowed for new musical forms to surface. As a result, the Church can boast of many traditions: Byzantine, Georgian, Armenian, Arabic, Bulgarian, Serbian, Kievan, Carpatho-Rus'ian, Valaam, Alaskan, Greek, Galician, *Znamenny*, *Put'*, *Devestmenny*, Romanian, Ethiopian, East Indian... surely I have forgotten to mention one or two. What a diverse and rich musical tradition we have!

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the Church has been relying primarily on existing musical structures from these traditions. One of the major issues (as mentioned above) is that these musical pieces were composed for non-English words. And so, choir directors in English-speaking parishes have faced the task of taking melodies that were written for other languages, and inserting English words.

Sometimes, the task is very simple: add a quarter note, delete a note, or hold a syllable longer to maintain the same beat value as the original (because there are less syllables in English). Figure 2 shows how five languages can make use of the same melody by adjusting the note values.

Memory Eternal No. 2

Figure 2. Using *Memory Eternal* to demonstrate how the same notes can be applied differently to various languages.

The free-chant structures of the Slavic tone systems actually make it quite easy to adapt the melodic structure to any text. However, metered music (such as Bortniansky's Cherubic Hymn #5, which is written in ¾ time), and highly melodic pieces require more musical skill in order to adapt these pieces while maintaining the linguistic integrity of English, the musical integrity of the piece, and the liturgical integrity of how this piece fits into the context of a service.

Sometimes, the musician decides to compose a new setting that will match the English words. Issues in composition are complex, since composition requires not only a strong musical background, but also a firm understanding of the services and how the pieces fit into the context of the services.

Johann von Gardner identifies six categories of hymns: doxastic, dogmatic, historical, moralistic, contemplative, and active.[10]

1. **Doxastic** hymns offer prayer or praise to God. Example: *We praise You; we bless You; we give thanks unto You, O Lord, and we pray unto You, O our God.*
2. **Dogmatic** hymns proclaim doctrine. Example*: Lord, I Call Resurrection Dogmaticon Tone 5 - In the Red Sea of old, a type of the virgin bride was pre-figured. There Moses divided the waters. Here Gabriel assisted in the miracle. There Israel crossed the sea without getting wet. Here the virgin gave birth to Christ without seed. After Israel's passage, the sea remained impassible. After Immanuel's birth, the virgin remained a virgin. O ever-existing God Who appeared in the flesh: O Lord, have mercy on us!*
3. **Historical** hymns give descriptions of historical events. Example: Litiya of Christmas -*The Magi, Kings of Persia, knew with assurance that You, the heavenly King, were born on earth; led by the light of*

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[10] Johann von Gardner. *Russian Church Singing. Volume 1: Orthodox Worship and Hymnography.* Trans. Vladimir Morosan. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1980), pp. 27-29

a star they came to Bethlehem and offered their chosen gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Falling before You, they worshipped You; for they saw You Who are timeless lying as a babe in the cave.

4. **Moralistic** hymns speak to the listener rather than God. Example: Aposticha of Forgiveness Sunday vespers - *Let us keep a worthy fast, one acceptable to the Lord. A true fast is the shunning of evil, control of the tongue, estrangement from anger, the setting aside of all sensuality, gossip, falsehood, and swearing. The weakening of all these will make the fast true and well-pleasing.*

5. **Contemplative** hymns are more reflective. Example: Praises of Holy Saturday - *Today the grave holds Him Who holds creation in the palm of His hand. A stone covers Him Who covers the heavens with virtue. Life sleeps and Hell trembles, and Adam is set free from his bonds. Glory to Your dispensation! Through it You have fulfilled all the eternal Sabbath rest and have granted us Your most holy Resurrection from the dead.*

6. **Active** hymns accompany liturgical actions. Example: The Cherubic Hymn - *Let us who mystically represent the cherubim and who sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity, now lay aside all earthly cares that we may receive the King of all Who comes invisibly up-borne by the angelic hosts. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*

When composing a new musical setting, it is important to reflect on the nature of the text itself. What kind of hymn is this? How does it fit into the service? As a result, what kind of musical style of performance (antiphonal, canonarchal, responsorial, solo-cantor, choir-only, or congregational) will be most appropriate or effective? Should the piece be fast or slow? Should the voicing be high, medium, or low range? Should the key signature be major or minor? How many parts should be represented? In order to have a cohesive musical structure, there are many factors to be taken into account.

On other occasions, the musician chooses to maintain the original musical setting and to adapt it. Figure 2 (above) gives an example of how the same melodic structure can be applied to various

languages. Figures 3 through 7 (below) show the individual languages on their own thereby demonstrating the differences in note values and slurs.

Figure 3. Memory Eternal (English)

Figure 4. Memory Eternal (Slavonic)

Figure 5. Memory Eternal (Greek)
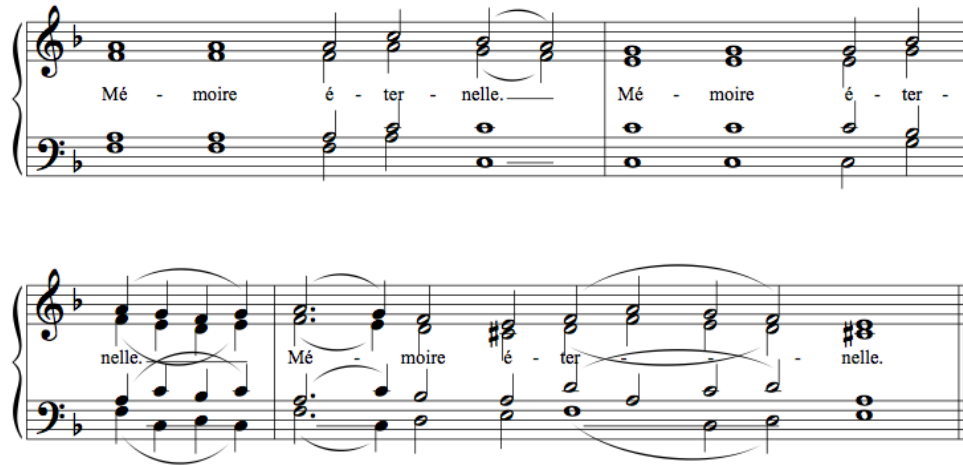
Figure 6. Memory Eternal (Romanian)

Figure 7. Memory Eternal (French)

These musical adjustments are minor, but at other times, great lengths must be taken in order to adapt a musical setting into another language. An English adaptation (Figure 9) of an Armenian melody (Figure 8) illustrates this point.

Figure 8. Excerpt from Midday Tone 4, Armenian Chant[11]

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[11] "Orhnootyoon ee partsoons" (Resurrection Midday Hymn for Tone 4). St Nersess Armenian Seminary. 2008. <http://www.stnersess.edu/classroom/sml/liturgy/jashou/index.php> (Date accessed: November 25, 2010).

Figure 9. It is Truly Meet. Adapted from Midday Tone 4, Armenian Chant[12]

In the English Theotokion, adapted from the Armenian Midday Tone 4, there is an entire line of music omitted. These notes would have been placed between the words *mother* and *of* (in the third line).

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[12] A. Wigglesworth, 2009.

However, since the English phrase is coming to an end, it makes sense to end the verbal phrase with the end of the melodic phrase. As a result, the middle melodic section has been omitted. The same event occurs at the end of the second verbal phrase. The final two verbal phrases follow the melodic structure of the piece but do not represent the original identically (which is not represented in the excerpt). In fact, the adaptation differs greatly from the original in these two final phrases.

Conclusion

As Orthodox communities examine the issue of church music through the lens of ethnomusicology in order to determine what kinds of music will be acceptable and accessible for their individual contexts, it is clear that they likely will develop different strategies based on their different needs. The many traditional styles of singing within the Orthodox Church are available for new communities to make use of. In time, the Shona in Zimbabwe may develop their own tonal system that makes use of traditionally Shona melodies and structures (like responsorial and canonarch styles). Parishes in North America may choose to adapt responsorial hymns to a congregational style. People groups who speak tonal languages will need to develop their own musical system in order to preserve the meanings behind the liturgical texts. People groups in non-tonal languages may choose to make use of an existing musical system and adapt the melodies to fit their language's sentence structure. New melodic compositions written in (and for) a particular language may be presented within a language community. In addition, other options that have not been explored in this discussion may also be presented to a community.

Let us not be satisfied with inadequate systems, but let us "sing to the Lord, all the earth. Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous works among all the

peoples" (1 Chronicles 16: 23-24 NRSV). Let us labour to develop indigenous music in all nations, including Canada and the United States of America, so that all of the faithful can realize that God speaks their language and that they are able to speak to Him from their own hearts instead of depending on foreign melodies that do not stir their souls.

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About the Author: AmandaEve Wigglesworth is an Independent Consultant for Epicure Selections, Instructor at St Arseny Institute, Winnipeg MB. She is a member of the St Peter the Aleut Orthodox Parish (OCA) in Calgary, AB.