

would proceed to write the bass part, and only then would he go back and craft the soprano and alto lines. He did not compose “chord by chord,” as some composers do today, but rather line by line, with the subsequent voices “forced to comply and conform” to the air sung in the tenor.<sup>427</sup> Therefore, as can be seen in Figure 4-5, since he had worked out the tenor and bass first in the earlier publication, those parts are relatively unchanged in the later version, with just a few added octaves for bass vocalists to sing in a lower register as desired.

The soprano and alto undergo more significant adjustments. Billings corrects a few mistakes, such as the missing B $\sharp$  in measure 7, but he also fills in some of the more awkward leaps and creates more rhythmic energy with passing eighth notes as well. Yet, some other aspects remained the same: Billings explained that “the last parts are seldom so good as the first [the tenor],” but that he tried to let them partake “of the same air, or, at least, as much of it as they can get.”<sup>428</sup> Therefore, you can see that in the first two bars of the last phrase—measures 13 and 14—the top voice (the soprano) echoes the melody that the tenor had introduced in measures 1 and 2.

The biggest change, however, was in the text. In 1770, Billings had set only a single stanza of poetry. Still, the rousing spirit of that one verse, alongside the vigorous, forward drive of the long-short-short-long rhythm that launches each of the melody’s four phrases, sufficed to make “[Chester](#)” a hit as a stirring march tune for New England regiments.<sup>429</sup> Given this quick popularity, Billings expanded the hymn by adding four more fist-shaking stanzas.

As suggested in the fourth stanza, the troops now had more “martial noise” to sing as they advanced on their British enemy, and “it was carried by the soldiers from camp to camp.”<sup>430</sup> In fact, “Chester’s” expanded strophic form soon became the most popular patriotic song of the Revolutionary War.<sup>431</sup> In the years since, the hymn has also been given sacred text: “[Let the high heav’ns your songs invite.](#)” William Schuman (1910–92) wove “Chester” into the third movement of his popular [orchestral](#) work *New England Triptych* (1956), also arranged for [band](#) in 1957. Not only is “Chester” Billings’s most famous tune, but for many people today, “Chester” remains the most recognizable new patriotic tune of the entire Revolutionary era.

### Listening Guide 12: “Chester” – 1779/1778 William Billings (1746–1800)

Timeline	Verse	Text	Musical and Textual Features
0:00	1	Let tyrants shake their i-ron rod, And Slav’ry <u>clank</u> her <u>galling</u> chains, We fear them <u>not</u> , we <u>trust</u> in God, New England’s <u>God</u> for <u>ever</u> reigns.	<i>Primarily conjunct melody in tenor voice, harmonized in four parts. Underlining indicates syllables with melismas</i>
	2	Howe and Burgoyne and Clinton too, With Prescot and Cornwallis join’d, Together plot our Overthrow, In one Infernal league combin’d.	<i>[omitted from recording]; Billings references several British military leaders to be vanquished by the “beardless” (i.e., youthful) Continental Army</i>
	3	When God inspir’d us for the fight, Their ranks were broke, their lines were forc’d, Their ships were Shatter’d in our sight, Or swiftly driven from our Coast.	

0:27	4	The Foe comes on with <u>haughty</u> Stride; Our troops <u>advance</u> with <u>martial</u> noise, Their Vet'rans <u>flee</u> <u>before</u> our Youth, And Gen'rals <u>yield</u> to <u>beardless</u> Boys.	<i>Musical structure of Verse 1 (0:00) is repeated.</i>
0:54	5	What grateful Off'ring <u>shall</u> we bring? What shall we <u>render</u> to the Lord? Loud Halleluiahs <u>let</u> us Sing,	<i>Musical structure of Verse 1 (0:00) is repeated.</i>
1:15		And praise his <u>name</u> on <u>ev'ry</u> Chord.	<i>Ritardando</i>

## Activist Artistry

As matters heated up in the colonies, additional poets and composers turned their artistry toward patriotic efforts. One celebrated example was “The American Hero,” a fifteen-stanza “Sapphick Ode” by American-born poet and minister Nathaniel Niles (1741–1828). A sapphic ode customarily has stanzas of three eleven-syllable lines followed by a fourth line of five syllables. It is possible that the Reverend Niles was inspired to use that uncommon poetic structure after seeing William Billings’s recent setting of a sapphic ode included as the very last piece in *The New-England Psalm-Singer*.<sup>432</sup>

Niles’s subject matter was the recent Battle of Bunker Hill and the burning of Charlestown in 1775. Although the British won that battle, they lost almost half of their attacking force, with their casualties being more than double those suffered by the patriots. By means of this conflict, the British learned that frontal attacks against the colonials could be very costly.<sup>433</sup> Niles issued his ode via broadside (see Figure 4-6), and it was quickly reprinted in numerous newspapers. Its sober message addressed the political situation of the era and the sacrifices that could—or must—be made. Kenneth Silverman summarizes the text’s stoic message as “Since death must come, let it come in a good cause.”<sup>434</sup>

Six years later, a “beautiful and grave” setting of Niles’s text, labeled “[Bunker Hill. A Sapphick Ode](#)” (Figure 4-7), was included in Andrew Law’s *A Select Number of Plain Tunes* (1781).<sup>435</sup> (Law was the Yankee tunesmith who had successfully petitioned the Connecticut General Assembly for copyright privileges that same year.) There is debate over who actually composed the plain tune, since no credit is included in Law’s tunebook. The piece was widely pirated, and in a couple



*The loss of General Joseph Warren was a bitter casualty for the patriots in the Battle of Bunker Hill.*

of the subsequent publications, credit was given to the Reverend Sylvanus Ripley (1749–87) as the composer. However, no other compositions by Ripley are known to exist, making his authorship a bit dubious.

As with the early colonial psalters, there are no words in Law’s sheet music version. Instead, singers were expected to couple the musical notation with the ode poetry that had been published earlier. You will remember that Sister Föben’s setting of “Die sanfte Bewegung, die liebliche Krafft” (Listening Example 2) had functioned the same way: performers needed to partner the music from the Ephrata Codex with the verses from a copy of *Turtel-Taube* in order to perform her complete hymn. Niles’s choice of an uncommon syllabic structure required an unusual musical setting in the composition, thereby resulting in a distinctive set piece that soon became a beloved addition to the Revolutionary repertory. The “Isaiah Thomas Broadside Ballads Project” presents a soloist singing [the tenor melody alone](#); the singer substitutes measures 9–12 from the soprano part for those same measures in