The decision to forgo federal funding through the W.P.A. posed financial challenges, but the HSO persevered. By the fall of 1941, World War II swept through Europe and nearly all of HSO’s musicians took leave to join the armed forces.

The future of the orchestra looked grim. The HSO only existed as a corporate entity, and it was not until the end of the war that Frank Goodwin II pulled together a new board of directors in a final attempt to save the HSO. Two alternating conductors were hired. George Heck and Moshe Paranov.

The end of the 1940s saw an unprecedented action: Hartford’s Local Musicians’ Union agreed to perform free for one year in an effort to get the symphony back on its feet. In 1949, the HSO performed for the first time since 1941, and finished the decade with increased attendance, an expanded concert season, and a renewed public interested in keeping the HSO alive.

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In 1953, Fritz Mahler, related to the legendary composer Gustav Mahler, was hired as the new conductor for the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. Determined to see the HSO expand and flourish, Mahler developed an educational mission and infused diversity into programming and performances.

His constant effort to expand the HSO’s role in Hartford led to the creation of “Young People’s Concerts” at The Bushnell, which are still a tradition today, and the “Hartford Little Symphony,” a concerned orchestra that played concerts at local schools. The 1950s were a particularly prolific commercial recording period for the HSO. Mahler led recordings with Vanguard of Cammin Buono, Berlioz’s Requiem, Gustav Mahler’s Das Lieder, Bloch’s Three Jewish Poems for Orchestra, and Copland’s Variations for Orchestra and Turn for the Common Man.

“The Mahler Decade

He had a flair for showmanship which encompassed the look of things on the stage; no handbags nor cases on the floor; no sloppy positions of players during rests; no crossed knees even during rehearsals.”

—Mary Lane, a member of the HSO from 1948 until her retirement in 1991