After leading the HSO for twenty-one years, Arthur Winograd announced his last season in 1984-85. After an extensive season-long search, Winograd was replaced by British conductor Michael Lankester in 1986. Lankester brought in a new wave of exciting guest artists and adventurous programming. The increase in performances and educational programs was thrilling for the audience, but some musicians felt over-worked and many suffered injuries from a schedule that was too demanding. The previous contract had created a 21-member full-time “core” of musicians who were paid a salary instead of a per-service rate.

In 1988, the musicians went on an 11-week strike, demanding a more reasonable work schedule and fair pay. The core members, although salaried for the season, were being paid less per-service than the non-core musicians. The end of the year saw a contract renegotiation with a reduced workload, increased pay, and the launch of five new series, including Family Concerts and the popular Classical Conversations series.

The 1990s saw the birth of new programs and events, but tension from the labor negotiations in 1988 was still felt between musicians and administration. As a result of an impassable contract dispute, the musicians experienced a 14-month lock-out, and the Symphony canceled the 1991-92 season. After the canceled season, Aetna’s CEO Ron Compton was called in to mediate, and the Symphony pulled through, celebrating its 50th anniversary season in 1993 with a triumphant fanfare written by Lankester. The high note of the 1990s was the inauguration of the Talcott Mountain Music Festival during the 1993-94 season, which proved to be a huge hit with the community. After several trial locations, the Festival found a permanent home at the Performing Arts Center at Simsbury Meadows in the heart of the scenic Farmington Valley. The summer-long concert series has developed a loyal following and continues each summer to this day.