

## ARTS &amp; CULTURE



"La Bohème," November 8, 2025. Act 2: Four Bohemians and their companions toast on Christmas Eve. Photo by C. Michael Clark.

## OPERA FOR ALL: INSIDE SUNSET PARK'S 56-YEAR COMMUNITY TREASURE, THE REGINA OPERA

By Angela S.

In a city where opera tickets often cost hundreds of dollars, one Brooklyn company has built a legacy by doing the opposite. For 56 years, the Regina Opera Company has been a hidden gem in my Sunset Park neighborhood, quietly proving that world-class, fully staged opera is for everyone.

Discovering Regina was a surprise. I first noticed their banner outside Our Lady of Perpetual Help (OLPH) during a pandemic walk in early 2021. I had lived in Sunset Park for years and had never heard of the Regina Opera Company, even though it was on my

block. I was genuinely shocked. I have been attending ever since, often bringing friends along. This company is a true neighborhood treasure.

Mattie, an opera newcomer and Sunset Park resident, sums it up perfectly: Regina Opera is "joyful, unpretentious, and professional."

Founded in 1970, the company spent its first 42 years at Regina Pacis Church in Dyker Heights before finding a new home in 2012: the auditorium of the OLPH parish school in Sunset Park.

The parish was established in 1892. For most of that time, the building echoed with children's voices. More recently, those voices



Regina Opera Company performs at Our Lady of Perpetual Help at 5902 6th Avenue in Sunset Park. Photo by Angela S.

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es faded. In 2025, low enrollment and financial constraints forced the school to close, leaving the Regina Opera to continue its lease in a space emblematic of urban change. For now, the music plays on in this community landmark.

Guiding this treasure is Francine "Fran" Garber-Cohen, Regina Opera President since 2014 and a company member since the 1970s.

"We put on operas that we think the audience would like," she said.



Regina Opera President, Francine "Fran" Garber-Cohen. Photo courtesy of Regina Opera.

This means beloved works like *La Bohème* and *Carmen*, performed in their original languages with a 35-piece orchestra and English supertitles.

"I think we're the number two game in town," said Music Director Scott Jackson Wiley, who has been with Regina since 1993 and built that 35-piece orchestra.

Tickets cost just \$25, or \$20 for seniors and students. Thanks to the grants Fran secures, both the professional orchestra and the singers are paid, ensuring high-caliber talent can afford to perform at accessible prices.

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### Ingenuity on a Budget

Regina is remarkably efficient, even on a very tight budget. That efficiency shows everywhere. The company makes sure key performers are ready and on time, and it turns mandatory dress rehearsals into free performances for the community. Costumes are created from donated materials that are thoughtfully and creatively repurposed.

Marcia Kresge, the company's costumer since 2016, brings that visual magic to the vocal talent. Alongside her volunteers, she is a master of creative repurposing. Kresge ensures historical accuracy by "creat[ing] everything synchronized for the period of the opera" to help the audience travel back in time. "We try to create that (feeling of) time traveling and create a magical experience," she said.

They cast three singers per principal role for reliability, ensuring there is always a backup. Stage Manager Thomas Geib, who started in the chorus 12 years ago, must "know the whole show cold." His perspective epitomizes the compa-

ny's all-hands-on-deck spirit.

Crucially, each production includes two or three free dress-rehearsal performances. "You can't do better than free," Fran said.

The production quality belies the modest ticket price. What you get at Regina, Geib said, is a classical experience that is much more approachable.

"I have heard people sing roles here that are better than the people I've heard sing those same roles at the Met," he said.

International artists like Yeawon Jun, hailing from South Korea, appreciate the focus on traditional, vocal-friendly repertoire:

"Regina really pursues the bel canto style... it helps beginning singers like me to save my voice." Bel canto, meaning "beautiful singing," is a style that lets singers focus on control and expression without pushing their voices.

Yeawon also noted the advantage of always rehearsing on stage: "We can feel every time how our singing can be delivered."

The experience is uniquely charming. Cast members in cos-



Action photo of Yeawon Jun (center) as Nedda, Paolo Buffagni (left) as Canio; and Peter Hakjoon Kim (right in red and white striped costume) as Tonio in the March 2025 "I Pagliacci." Photo by Ed Lee.

tume sell raffle tickets; tea and local bakery cookies are sold at intermission. Katherine Thompson, a soprano, loves the tradition: "It speaks to opera as being a community event."

"It's such a unique, New York thing," said Sunset Park resident Mattie.

From my seat, the diverse cast reflects Sunset Park and NYC itself.

**Resilience and A Stage for Excellence**

Like lots of organizations, businesses, and beloved community projects, the pandemic affected Regina, too. But it did not silence it. When the stages went dark in March 2020, Regina's singers and pianists, in full costume, performed in an empty hall and recorded the concerts to be made free on their YouTube channel, which is accessible through their website.

They returned to the stage in Spring 2022 with La Bohème, a homecoming met with overwhelming gratitude from an audience starved for shared, live experience.

Helen Van Tine-Golden, a director new to Regina said that this type of resilience attracts serious talent. "Everyone is respectful; they honor every singer. Fran is this earth mother guardian... They have singers banging down the door," she said.

**On the Horizon**

This season is a perfect sampler. Giacomo Puccini's poignant one-act Suor Angelica, which runs under an hour, is an ideal introduction. In April, a special 56th-anniversary concert will celebrate the company's enduring vitality. In May, the



"La Bohème," Act 4, November 13, 2025. Mimi (Audrey DuBois Harris) is dying, tended by her lover Rodolfo (David Freides). Photo by Steven Pisano.



"La Bohème," November 2025. Four Bohemians (David Freides, Ian Joyal, Sung Shin, & Elian Ramos Fuentes) pay landlord Benoit (Gary Giardina) with wine to avoid paying rent. Photo by Sabrina Palladino.



"La Bohème," November 2025. Parpignol, the toy seller (Thibault Courtois), and neighborhood children. Photo by Sabrina Palladino.

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spring opera season closes with the grand, passionate Carmen. Regina Opera continues year-round with summer concerts, followed by a fall opera season.

For Scott, the music director, the collective effort is paramount: "It's as fine an example of what humanity is able to achieve... It's just about the work and the love of it."

In an ever-changing city, Regina Opera is a remarkable constant. The school at OLPH has closed, but Regina's 56-year story is one of adaptation. It is a place where grandeur meets neighborhood warmth, sustained by a simple belief: this art belongs to everyone who walks through the door.

**Suor Angelica + Concert**

Feb. 28, Mar. 1, 7, & 8 at 3 PM

Tickets available on the company website

Plus FREE open dress rehearsals:

Feb. 21 at 3 PM (with piano)

Feb. 26 at 7 PM (with orchestra)

**Carmen**

May 9, 10, 16, & 17 at 3 PM

Plus FREE open dress rehearsals:

May 2 at 3 PM (with piano)

May 7 at 7 PM (with orchestra)

To learn more, visit the Regina Opera Company website at [www.ReginaOpera.org](http://www.ReginaOpera.org) or follow them on Instagram at [@reginaoperacompany](https://www.instagram.com/reginaoperacompany). To join the mailing list, send them an email at [reginaopera@yahoo.com](mailto:reginaopera@yahoo.com).

The Regina Opera is located at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, 5902 6th Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11220 ■

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**When can Sunset Park community members get food from your warehouse?**

Twice a month, we host the Sunset Park Mobile Market in our parking lot, where we distribute free, fresh produce. The Sunset Park Mobile Market quickly became our largest mobile market in the city, regularly serving more than 1,000 households twice a month. Community members who need food can come to the market on the 2nd Friday and 4th Saturday of each month from 9:30am-11:30am. You can also access a food map on our website, which lists all of the different local food pantries and soup kitchens in your neighborhood.



(L) Carrots and (R) melons stored in temperature-controlled compartments at City Harvest's Sunset Park warehouse before distribution to the community. Photos by Rebecca M.

**What should someone who is looking for food support know about your food pantry?**

City Harvest rescues fresh, high-quality food that would otherwise go to waste and delivers it, free of charge, to hundreds of food pantries, soup kitchens, and community partners across the city. If you need fresh produce, come to us: Last year, 76% of the food we rescued and delivered was fruits and vegetables.

**How can people who want to help get involved?**

Our work would not be possible without the support of our volunteers. In Sunset Park, we host bi-weekly repack shifts at our warehouse, where volunteers help to pack bulk containers of fresh produce into family-sized bags to more equitably distribute to our partners, as well as Mobile Market volunteer shifts, where volunteers help distribute food to community members.

**City Harvest Sunset Park Mobile Market**

2nd Friday and 4th Saturday of each month from 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM  
Free fresh produce in Sunset Park, Brooklyn

Find food near you: [cityharvest.org/food-map](http://cityharvest.org/food-map)  
Learn more or volunteer: [cityharvest.org](http://cityharvest.org)



Charlie turned his curiosity into a comic. Find it on the back page! ■