

Social attitudes

New data from the US highlights how deeply music organisations have embraced social media. But does reaching out through such platforms come at a cost? **David Kettle** investigates

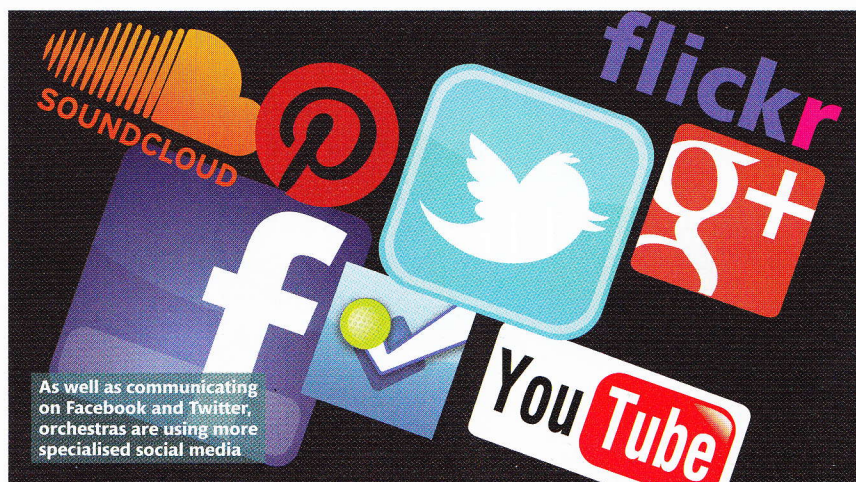
A REPORT RELEASED IN JANUARY

by the Pew Research Center in Washington DC has confirmed the growing importance of social media to US arts organisations. Polling 1,244 organisations that received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the study found that 97 per cent had a social media presence, and 91 per cent agreed that the benefits they gained from it outweighed the resources they devoted to it.

The power of social media is felt especially strongly in small-scale music organisations with little budget for traditional marketing. Classical Revolution (CR) is a grassroots network that brings informal performances to non-traditional venues. Having launched in San Francisco, it now has chapters as far afield as Seattle, Amsterdam and Melbourne. 'A good amount of our communication with fans as well as with musicians is done over Facebook,' explains founder and viola player Charith Premawardhana, 'and we've been using Twitter more and more to post about upcoming performances.' The reasons are simple, according to CR Sacramento organiser and cellist Skye Bergen: 'Traditional marketing is something we'd have to pay for, and we wouldn't be able to afford it. Social media is free – and most users are younger, which is the age group that CR looks to reach out to.'

At the other end of the spectrum, the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) is one of many high-profile music organisations that employ staff members specifically to manage their social-media presence. 'I started a Facebook profile in 2007, followed by Twitter in 2009,' explains the LSO's digital marketing manager Jo Johnson, 'and we also have presence on Foursquare, Google+, Pinterest and Soundcloud – platforms with specific functions. I don't see it as a marketing tool, though – its purpose is not expressly to sell tickets.'

Hazel Savage, publicity coordinator at the Australian Chamber Orchestra



(ACO) – which predominantly uses Facebook and Twitter – echoes that sentiment. 'The aim is to give added value to our subscribers and concertgoers, so we don't assign a dollar value to every element of our social media.'

Johnson and Savage both accept the difficulties in evaluating the impact of social media in hard figures, but point to its success in building relationships with audiences, through insights into the daily lives of their musicians or humorous anecdotes or photos. 'It's called "social" media for a reason,' argues Johnson. 'People use the platforms to socialise, not to receive a cold, hard sales pitch.' And Bergen stresses the importance of social media in nurturing partnerships with other arts organisations: 'It's a great tool for discovering who else is out there. And it's been surprisingly wonderful at creating links with other classical music groups.'

DESPITE THE ADVANTAGES that social media brings, the biggest challenge for arts organisations, according to the Pew report, is the resources needed for it: 74 per cent of the groups surveyed felt they did not have sufficient staff to use it effectively. Johnson admits that she has to update the LSO's Facebook and Twitter accounts several times a day, and the ACO, according to Savage, makes use of everyone within the

organisation – from musicians to admin staff – to post updates. Premawardhana uses social-media management system HootSuite to schedule a dozen or so Facebook and Twitter updates every day.

And not all of the effects of social media on music ensembles are positive. The Pew report highlights 'unfiltered public criticism of the organisation' as a possible detrimental outcome, and Johnson confirms that this can be a two-way process: 'The biggest danger is potential damage to the brand. And not just where you open yourself up to negative comments, but also by the organisation itself posting the wrong things, or things in the wrong tone.' Nevertheless, says Savage, it's vital to keep social-media communication flowing: 'We respond to everyone who is measured and courteous – everyone is entitled to an opinion, and we appreciate their dialogue with the ACO.'

The Pew survey found that Facebook and Twitter are far in the lead as the most-used social media platforms in the music world. But with an enormous range of other, often more specialised platforms offering alternative means for music groups to connect both with their audiences and with each other, it's a sector that can only expand and diversify. ■