

## THE MUSIC PANEL, GRAND GULCH

---

Among the rock art panels of Grand Gulch is an enigmatic little sketch that I have called the “music panel.” It is obviously not prehistoric, yet does not fit the pattern of modern graffiti.

### SETTING

Grand Gulch is the major drainage of Cedar Mesa. The overhanging walls of its canyon preserve many prehistoric ruins, pictographs, and petroglyphs. It is famous for its impressions of birds and bird-headed anthropomorphic figures. The music panel is centrally located on a long wall known for its rows of ring-necked ducks with oval bodies and missing or inconspicuous feet (Figure 1).

### HISTORY

The discovery of the archaeological significance of Grand Gulch is attributed to Charles McLoyd and C. C. Graham in 1891 (Blackburn and Williamson, 1996:27). Systematic archaeological recording and collecting began in the winter 1893–1894 with an expedition for the American Museum of Natural History, financed by the Hyde brothers and led by Richard Wetherill (Blackburn and Williamson 1996:47). The Wetherills continued an interest in the Gulch in the 1890s and 1900s until Richard’s death in 1910. Subsequently the Gulch remained the domain of cattlemen and pot-hunters, relatively unknown



*Figure 1. Ducks and duck-headed anthropomorphs in red and white paint.*



**Figure 2.** *The music panel.*

to the outside world until completion of State Highway 95 in the 1970s.

## DESCRIPTION

### Three Elements

The “music panel” drawing is composed of three elements: a treble clef, a doublet of 16th notes in descending scale, and a pair of odd looking deformed notes (Figure 2). It is carefully and artistically drawn in black paint, probably a mixture of cooking grease and charcoal, which was the standard medium of pioneer painters. The artist has simply but profoundly expressed the mystery of the place using some of the conventions of the ancient artists, including transformation or shape-changing, to convey the idea of a spiritual journey to a time beyond present time.

### The Treble Clef

The student of ancient languages will recognize this glyph as a spiral bisected by a straight line. Locally this symbol appears to signify a journey: perhaps a physical journey, spiritual journey, or migration story (Figure 3). In modern musical notation the treble clef means the beginning of a musical journey which will pass through a number of bars or stanzas and end somewhere else, but it can also indicate a spiritual journey (Figure 4).



**Figure 3.** *Sheep hunt panel, Escalante River. The bisected spiral and deer(?) track are in an indentation indicating action in another dimension (or past tense). Then the story line climbs to the present rock surface and passes beneath the sheep.*



**Figure 4.** *The treble clef sometimes signifies a spiritual journey.*

### **The Notes**

The second element is a couplet of sixteenth notes in descending scale, standard twentieth century musical notation. I don't know birds from barnacles, but this little two-note song can be heard in many parts of Utah in the spring.

### **The Transformation**

In the third element, the two notes are advancing from the wall, and are becoming singing birds. Their legless oval bodies mimic the Anasazi ducks; their beaks are raised in song.

Note that the three elements of the drawing are read in a clockwise spiral (an analogy with the spiral of the treble clef) and thus the painting itself is a metaphor of transformation. The painting becomes a window through the hard surface of the present and the viewer is swept away to the time of the ancestors—to a canyon of singing birds, barking dogs, laughing children, the smell of dew on dusty juniper, and morning light streaming through the smoke of cooking fires.

### **WHO WAS THE ARTIST?**

Below the music panel are two scrubbed spots. It may be that the artist signed the work and his or her name has since been erased. I'll bet someone out there knows who he/she was.

### **CODA**

The rock art of Grand Gulch was created and modified over centuries by generations of people who lived there or traveled through. Here we see that additions have continued up to the modern era. Who decides whether it is appropriate to paint on the canyon walls? Does one need to be a certified shaman? And who decides what is art and what is graffiti?

### **REFERENCE CITED**

Blackburn, Fred M., and Ray A. Williamson  
1996 *Cowboys and Cave Dwellers*. School of  
American Research Press, Santa Fe, New  
Mexico.

