In *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener*, author and composer David Toop discusses the feelings evoked by sounds through historical, psychological, and artistic perspectives. Through analyses of different mediums, Toop furthers the discussion of listening and how the listener receives sound, or non-sound. Toop expands beyond his experimental compositions and writings about types of music, such as *Rap Attack* (1984) and *Ocean of Sound* (1995). He looks at how the listener observes sounds psychologically and how this affects the listener’s view of the artwork. The author discusses different historical aspects of listening and the psychological effects of sound. Toop then looks at silent art and how, even though it is silent, the observer can imagine sounds clearly. He also delves into the ghostly and nostalgic affect that sound possesses. Furthermore, he explores the idea of listening through a unique angle, discussing whether sounds or silence have an effect on the observer. The author also explains the passive or active role the ear can play in hearing. Through the discussion of these topics, Toop brings forth a new analytical apparatus by which to explore listening from psychological, historical, and artistic perspectives.

In the first section of the book, Toop discusses the sounds that connect him to the past. He examines the historical aspects of listening, and the psychology associated with these sounds. Toop looks at ancient Greek mythology in order to examine sound psychology. In addition, he spends some time examining the
feelings that these myths evoked in the characters, particularly the character of Pan. Toop’s strongest example is how Pan expressed his feelings through his pan pipes. As Pan chases after Syrinx, the sound produced by his pan pipes manifest his feelings of lust and desire. The sound produced by Pan’s pipes is an excellent example of psychological sound found in historical mythology. This historical reference frames the rest of Toop’s discussion of the psychological aspects of sound and how these sounds can evoke feelings in the listener.

Following this section is a look at art and how “silent” art can speak. Artwork from the prerecording era informs concepts of silence which Toop further explores. These artifacts such as paintings or books, offer the observer the opportunity to hear in their minds the sounds implied by these works. By studying silent art, the viewer has the opportunity to hear sounds that could not be recorded at the time, but can be imagined through the artist’s portrayal. Toop explains that, through the vivid colours in the artwork, the observer’s imagination creates sounds in the mind, so that the observer can hear the artist’s intent. Toop emphasizes the aspect of relating a painting to sounds in order to understand what is seen. He effectively uses the example of a painting to show the art of listening. In Lovers with a Woman Listening (1656) by Nicolaes Maes, in which an eavesdropping woman leads the observer to listen to the sounds portrayed in the painting, such as that of the lovers kissing or the crying baby. This and other analyses support Toop’s idea that silent art speaks for itself and that even sounds that can no longer be replicated can be heard in the onlooker’s mind.

In the third portion of the book, Toop discusses the discomforting possibilities of sound. He talks about the unease of the listener upon hearing an unknown sound. He claims that the noises that surround us are comfort noises, and when they are missing we feel uneasy. In this portion of the book, the author examines the energy of sound or lack of sound, such as when a burglar is in a house. This idea of a burglar connects the reader to a feeling that is familiar yet uncomfortable and helps us understand Toop’s point. Toop explains that when there is a lack of sound the listener is left feeling uncomfortable and prone to imagine the change is supernatural. Accordingly, Toop also analyzes the exploratory aspects of music and how a sound can connect humans to the untouchable, such as death. In addition, he brings up the possibility of these sounds being created in relation to associations or cultural traditions, such as the mythological Sandman. Furthermore, Toop suggests that the idea that some sounds are evil, such as the siren song in The Odyssey, produces eerie feelings in the listener. These ideas resonate with the reader and make a connection, even if it is simply remembering how it felt to be a child and afraid of the dark.

Finally, Toop examines the nature of hearing and how it is understood
differently than seeing. He states that the ears are not active like the eyes, so he questions whether the ears are attentive or not. He discusses the question of hearing without the ability or desire to listen through the examples of the butchered ear. He argues that the ear wants to be shut off and begs for rest, and so the ear is sliced off or butchered, as in Van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889). This is an example of the ear demanding peace—Van Gogh heard voices due to his madness, and wanted to stop the sounds. Furthermore, Toop unpacks the possibility of the total absence of silence because the eyes and ears interpret every “silence.” This is seen in Edvard Munch’s artwork entitled *The Scream* (1893–1910). This is an excellent example because the painting is so vivid, and the ears cannot help but imagine the sound. In this way, Toop argues silence is impossible to achieve.

In *Sinister Resonance*, David Toop uses examples from fairy tales and Greek myths to examine the psychological aspects of sound. He shows that these myths use sound as a way to evoke feelings. Through art and literature, the author again introduces the idea that images or words can create sounds in the observer’s mind. Furthermore, he looks at the psychological aspect of the history of sound through the discussion of Greek myths. When describing the sounds evoked from silent art, Toop uses real examples of artwork and literature to relate the connections between the visual and the aural. He successfully analyzes paintings to show how artwork is alive with sound. Toop touches on the uneasiness related to ghosts by discussing the effect of sudden sounds and lack of sounds. He also looks at the possibility of sound and music representing evil.

On the whole, Toop’s analyses are helpful in defending his thesis and describing his views. The book moves quickly through the different examples to keep the reader’s attention. Toop references many different works of art, however, and often does not give enough information about each example. If the reader is unfamiliar with works of art, there may be too many examples to explore without an explanation from the author. Toop may have better proved his points through fewer examples and more detailed information. His examples were effective, however, and his unique perspective of historical, psychological, and artistic sounds presents a stimulating addition to the previous works on listening and sound.