Youn Sun Nah - Lento (2013)

A1 Lento 3:04 A2 Lament 3:40 A3 Hurt 5:22 A4 Empty Dream 4:20 A5 Momento Magico 5:32 B1 Soundless Bye 3:44 B2 Full Circle 3:36 B3 Ghost Riders In The Sky 4:58 B4 Waiting 3:30 B5 Arirang 4:25 B6 New Dawn 3:42 Accordion, Accordion [Accordina] – Vincent Peirani Bass, Cello – Lars Danielsson Guitar [Guitars] – Ulf Wakenius Percussion – Xavier Desandre-Navarre Vocals, Producer – Youn Sun Nah

Youn Sun Nah's rejection of a multi-record deal with French outfit Label Bleu to preserve her artistic freedom indicated that a change was in the air, following five recordings with her French 5tet band. Signed up by German label ACT, Nah released two critically and commercially successful albums, Voyage (2009) and Same Girl (2010), with the same core group of guitarist Ulf Wakenius, bassist Lars Danielsson and percussionist Xavier Desandre-Navarre. Both albums borrowed from the language of jazz, folk and pop, though Same Girl marked a stylistic shift towards emotionally edgier material. On Lento, Nah goes deeper still into the emotional psyche and, as the title suggests, slows things down in the process.

Generally, the arrangements are stripped down to the bare essentials; Nah is accompanied only by Wakenius's acoustic guitar on the title track, an ode to the caressing balm of nature, and on "Hurt," Nine Inch Nail singer Trent Reznor's melodically beautiful yet anguished account of drug abuse. On both numbers Nah's delivery is intimate and soulful. There's a similar soul-laid-bare intimacy in the vocal and bass intro to "Lament"; "My life is short and my days are running, as fast as you loved me, as fast as you left me," Nah sings, and there's striking contrast between the singer's slow, poetic delivery and accordionist Vincent Peirani's cheery lines.

On "Soundless Bye," another examination of inner hurt, Nah sings, "I've been hurting but my tongue won't say anything," on what could almost be a prologue to "Lament." Though not a blues in style, Nah is clearly at home with its inherent spirit; Issues of genre aside, Nah's

poignant delivery throughout Lento is never less than convincing. "Waiting," with Danielsson on cello, is melodically sweeter, though the silence of the "summer rain at dawn" that Nah sings of gives way to a "battlefield of lost love."

The high speed unison lines that have become something of a trademark between Nah and Wakenius get a run out on the percussion-driven "Momento Magico," as the singer gives rein to her impressive range and technique. In her idiosyncratic, Tom Waits-esque version of "Ghost Riders in the Sky" Nah joins the Grateful Dead, Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley as artists who have interpreted Stan Jones' 1948 country song. Nah explores her roots on the hauntingly pretty Korean folk song "Arirang," with gentle accompaniment courtesy of Wakenius on acoustic guitar and Peirani on accordina—a hybrid between accordion and mouth organ.

Thematically, there's a suite-like thread to Nah's compositions, though "New Dawn," a mixture of melancholy and quietly voiced optimism, looks towards the future "like a flower waiting to bloom," rather than providing any happy resolution to Lento's tales of love dying and love lost.

Nah's eclecticism makes her difficult to pin down and Lento will only add to the "is she a jazz singer?" debate. Nah certainly can do jazz—and plenty more besides—but Lento is simply a singer/songwriter's album of great intimacy, poetry and charm, and Nah's most personal statement to date. ---Ian Patterson, allaboutjazz.com

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