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Brightman's Virtual Unreality

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Probably around the time Sarah Brightman's dancers came out dressed like characters in "Alice in Wonderland," and then Brightman appeared as Little Red Riding Hood pedaling a stationary bicycle through a virtual forest, pursued by holographic Big Bad Wolves that were also on bicycles, the choice presented by Wednesday night's concert at [Verizon Center](#) became clear: Either accept it on its own terms or go home grumpy.

Because while the soprano can mingle the overwrought and the inexplicable with seeming ease on record, there are serious obstacles to simply placing her in a hockey barn. She can't lose her breath and risk missing a high C, so leading dance numbers is out. Conjuring the imaginary world invoked by her lavish songs requires the very latest in stage technology -- in this case, three giant

panels on louvers, onto which various 3-D worlds were projected.

And finally, there must be kettle drums. Lots of kettle drums.

Surrender to these absurdities, and the show is a hoot. With often nothing behind her but a virtual Middle-earth landscape and nothing in front of her but well-cantilevered décolletage, the 48-year-old singer blasted out song after song from a career that's encompassed disco, Broadway and heavily reverbed takes on opera. Hers is not a voice with a good first gear: Breathy and thin in quiet parts, it comes into its own when martial snares are snapping, synthesized strings are swirling, and electric guitars are punctuating beats with power chords that suggest rock without ever straying into rock. As such, pacing a Sarah Brightman show can be a problem, too, since it can get exhausting listening to song after song that sounds as if its only logical use is to open the Olympics.

Brightman fought anthem fatigue by bringing on tenor Fernando Lima for a duet of "Ave Maria" -- not the Bach/Gounod classic (though she performs that one, as well, on her new album, "A Winter Symphony"), but a Spanish pop song that saw some of the evening's most beautiful harmonies. It was quite a contrast to another duet with Mario Frangoulis, who took the part of the Phantom in "The Phantom of the Opera." "Sing for me!" he commanded, and she replied with hair-raising, ear-frying vocal acrobatics.

The soprano devoted much of her set to pop-classical reworkings of opera arias and to epic covers of songs by [Neil Diamond](#), the [Bee Gees](#) and Kansas. She sang a version of "What a Wonderful World" while dressed in a silver ballerina outfit, her tutu augmented by thigh-high

boots, and she climbed to the top of a "Princess and the Pea" set in a flamenco-inspired red dress with gold ornaments all a-dangle. The virtual world behind her added to the spectacle -- now an ivy-covered hallway, now a redwood forest, now a Japanese woodcut. The best use of the stage, though, was when she and her eight dancers lay on the floor and were projected onto the screens as if they were floating through space in a clocklike formation. Brightman splayed herself in the center like a shipwreck victim, CGI water swirling around her as the dancers pretended to swim.

When speaking to the audience, Brightman was unfailingly gracious, if a little stiff, addressing the "ladies and gentlemen" like a little girl mimicking her governess. She thanked them for giving her "the most wonderful career for 30 years." She told them it was "time to say goodbye" before launching into her hit single of the same name. And three encores later, when it was really time to go, she raised her arms above her black angel wings and toward the virtual sky and then disappeared behind a very real curtain.